


THE EARLY HISTORY OF MGAR:
WHEN HISTORY BECOMES LEGEND

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he Mgar was undoubtedly the most powerful family of the Tibetan empire during the second half of the seventh century. The family has already been the subject of a fine overview in Hugh Richardson's article "The Mgar Family in Seventh Century Tibet."¹ His approach combines data from both Chinese and old Tibetan sources, but also briefly deals with legends about the travel of the famous minister Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung to China. However, later accounts are only partially evoked, and much remains to be said.

The present study will start with the history of the Mgar family in the seventh century, before examining its later reshaping. It is a striking feature of the subject that lives of the early Mgar are relatively well documented by historically reliable sources, such as Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts and Chinese sources, and the subject for legendary developments in both written and oral literatures.²

A history of the Mgar family in the seventh century

The Mgar family up to Mgar Stong btsan Yul zung (first half of the seventh century)

History of the Mgar family begins in the years preceding Srong btsan Sgam po's reign (618?–649) and the unification of the Tibetan plateau around the beginning of the seventh century. In PT 1286's catalogue of principalities³ they are mentioned together with Mnyan as ministers (*blon po*) of Dgu gri Zing po rje [Khri pangs sum], lord of Ngas po. They do not however appear as such in any other Dunhuang document at my disposal, but as both Mkhas pa Lde'u and Dpa' bo Gtsug lag 'Phreng ba⁴ agree with PT 1286's

¹ Richardson 1998: 114–123.

² A list of all historical and legendary Mgar is given in charts at the end of the paper.

³ For a French translation see Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 83. Transliterations of the quoted manuscripts (ms.) are those of the internet website "Old Tibetan Documents Online."

⁴ Respectively in Mkhas pa Lde'u 1987: 255; and Dpa' bo Gtsug lag 'Phreng ba 2003: 155–156. Both present catalogues of principalities obviously related to those of PT 1060, PT 1286 and PT 1290, but differing from them as they place

statement, this tradition might have been widespread before the closing of the Dunhuang “library cave” in the eleventh century. On the other hand, the *Dunhuang Chronicle*’s relation of the conquest of Ngas po,⁵ first by [Dgu gri] Zing po rje Khri pangs sum then by Gnam ri Slon mtshan, includes a Mnyan ’Dzi zung Nag po amongst the ministers of this land but ignores the Mgar.⁶

The *Chronicle* places the first great minister (*blon chen*) of Mgar extraction, named Khri sgra ’Dzi rmun, in the time of Gnam ri Slon mtshan.⁷ He is praised for his wisdom and succeeded by Myang Mang po rje Zhang snang, said to be Srong btsan Sgam po’s first great minister. After him, another Mgar, called Mang zham Sum snang, is said to have become great minister. Although the text is difficult in some parts, it appears that a character named Khu Khri snya Dgru zung played a part in his downfall, and that Mgar Mang zham Sum snang eventually committed suicide. Khyung po Spung

Zhang zhung in second place while it is usually found in first position in Dunhuang manuscripts. Furthermore, Mkhas pa Lde’u and Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba’s catalogues disagree on one occasion. The territory called “Brog mo Rnam gsum” is included by Mkhas pa Lde’u but not by Nyang ral, while “Kong yul Bre sna” is included by Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba but not by Mkhas pa Lde’u (these principalities are found in PT 1286 and PT 1060). It can thus be inferred that Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba did not copy Mkhas pa Lde’u’s list, but had access to similar sources.

⁵ Ms. PT 1287, l. 118–198, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 132–139.

⁶ According to Richardson 1998: 121, the Mgar survived both invasions unscathed. There is hardly any evidence however that they were already in Ngas po before Khri pangs sum’s invasion. For Zing po rje Stag skya bo is the name of the earliest lord of the land we are aware of, while Dgu gri Zing po rje and Zing po rje Khri pangs sum are interchangeable names in both early (ms. PT 1290, l. recto 5, verso 6) and later documentation (Mkhas pa Lde’u 1987: 225). There is thus no reason to believe that Mgar’s service predated Zing po rje Khri pangs sum’s invasion.

⁷ Ms. PT 1287 l. 79–83, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 130. There is much confusion around this character. Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba states that he was a minister of Khri Sgra spung btsan, but a few lines later he also mentions Mgar Gnya’ btsan Ldem bu—obviously for Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu who died in 685–686—amongst the ministers of Khri Thog rje Thog btsan, that tradition thus seems to be of late fabrication (Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba 2003: 166) The *Bsgrags pa gling grags* (quoted in Bellezza 2009: 224) has Ghar Khri khra ’Dzin mu and Mang po rje Zhang nam—respectively recalling of Mgar Khri sgra ’Dzi rmun and his successor [Myang] Mang po rje Zhang snang—but during the reign of Khri Mang slon (649–677). Although the ministers are there placed in a chronological order similar to the *Chronicle*, their attribution to that reign must be erroneous as they do not appear in the *Annals*. The *Annals* makes a curious statement concerning the year of the Dragon (764–765): “Zhang [Mchims rgyal] Rgyal zigs [Shu theng] was bestowed the great turquoise insignia and praised for saying he was content with the jurisdiction of Mgar ’dzi rmun.” Translation from Dotson 2009: 133–135, see also ms. Or. 8212 l. 60, and Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 66. Brandon Dotson, following an edict of Khri Srong lde btsan mentioning *blon gra ’dzi zhang* Ram shags (Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag ’Phreng ba 2007: 372), suggests that *gra dzi/mgar ’dzi rmun* might be a title. The perspective is interesting but still requires verification.

sad Zu tse then took over the office. The latter, in his old age, would have planned to murder Srong btsan Sgam po, but yet another Mgar named Stong rtsan Yul zung, after discovering the scheme, informed the sovereign. Khyung po Spung sad Zu tse committed suicide and the *Chronicle* placed an oath of loyalty between Srong btsan Sgam po and his newly appointed great minister: Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung. The exact family links between him, Khri sgra 'Dzi rmun, and Mang zham Sum snang are unknown.

Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's career (circa 646–668)

There is no known mention of Srong brtsan Sgam po's wedding with the Nepalese princess Bhrikuti Devi neither in Tibetan nor Nepalese contemporary sources.⁸ Whether it actually occurred or not, the story as told by later accounts and involving Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung clearly belongs to the realm of legend. It is only with cross references between the *Old Tibetan Annals* and Chinese documentation that we leave the romanticised narration of the *Dunhuang Chronicle* to enter history proper. In December 640, Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung went to the Chinese court to negotiate a matrimonial alliance. He returned in February 641 to escort the bride, Wencheng Kong jo, to Tibet, and again in 646 to congratulate Tang Taizong (626–649) for his military success in Korea.⁹

After the death of the Tibetan *btsan po* Khri Srong btsan Sgam po in 649, Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung became the most powerful character at the Tibetan court. In the *Annals*, he is shown as taking care of administrative and legal tasks of importance, such as the separation between *rgod* and *g.yung* (654–655), and the redaction of a code of law (655–656).¹⁰ He is also seen leading hunts (in 653–654 and 656–657) and remaining in 'A zha country from 659 to 666 in order to subdue it, briefly travelling to Zhang zhung in 662–663 for administrative purposes.

⁸ Doubts concerning the historicity of the wedding with the Nepalese princess have first been expressed by Giuseppe Tucci whom earliest reference was Grags pa Rgyal mtshan (1146–1216). Other scholars have expressed similar ideas although in a more nuanced way as the relations between early Tibet and Nepal were undoubtedly tight (Richardson 1998: 209; Slusser 1982: 33–35). More Tibetan works of importance mentioning the Nepalese princess have surfaced since Tucci's article (Nyang ral, Lde'u Jo sras, Mkhas pa lde'u, *Dba' bzhed*).

⁹ On Mgar Stong rtsan's embassies in Chinese sources see: Pelliot 1961: 4–7, 83–84; and Demiéville 1987: 203. Mgar obviously made a strong impression at the Tang court. According to Chinese documentation the emperor honoured him and gave him a wife despite his protestations. In later Tibetan accounts, Mgar shows no interest in her, pretending to be sick in order to fulfil his scheme. For a Tibetan traditional account of the embassy see Sørensen (translator) 1994: 213–249.

¹⁰ Respectively civilians and soldiery, on which see Uray 1971: 553–556.

He died in Ris pu, the year following his return to Tibet (667–668).¹¹ There is a slight contradiction in Dunhuang material as the *Chronicle* reports that Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung, being old, retired from his office of great minister to the benefit of 'O ma Lde Khri bzang Lod btsan.¹² But the latter was soon to be accused of betrayal and killed. Mgar would then have taken back the post and died of old age six years later. There is nothing to confirm this story in the *Annals*.¹³

Hegemony of the Mgar family (668–695)

Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's succession was disputed as there were seemingly two candidates to replace him in office.¹⁴ Dba's Sum snang had the favour of the lesser officers (*zhang lon pra mo*) and of the vassals (*'bangs*). He was possibly related to Dba's Phangs to re Dbyi tshab; a minister who had sworn in his old days an oath with Srong btsan Sgam po assuring that, unless their loyalty should fail, "for a son of Dbyi tshab, there shall be no less than gold insignia."¹⁵ Btsan snya Ldom bu, one of Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's son, had the support of both the *btsan po* Khri Mang slon (649–677) and the ministers (*rje blon*). In a secret council, they settled that Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu would be great minister with Dba's Sum snang as a subaltern (*'og pon*) so that he could learn the duties of office. Eventually, the conflict was solved by Dba's Sum snang's death at an unknown date.

Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod, another son of Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung, is known to have successfully fought the Chinese in the

¹¹ See ms. PT 1288 l. 48, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 32; and Dotson 2009: 88.

¹² See ms. PT 1287 l. 101–104, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 131.

¹³ It is suggested in Lde'u Jo sras 1987: 109, that Mgar Stong rtsan actually slandered "'O ma Lde Khri bzang Long btsan" and that he was great minister for twenty-one years (see also Dotson 2006: 55, 64). 'O ma Lde Khri bzang Lod btsan was probably at some point a close relation to Srong btsan Sgam po. The *Chronicle* remembers him amongst the witnesses of Srong btsan and Dba's Dbyi tshab's reciprocal oath (ms. PT 1287 l. 247–299, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 143–147). His name also appears in the story of Khyung po Spung sad Zu tse's betrayal as someone the traitorous minister has not met before the treachery (ms. PT 1287 l. 93–101, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 130–131). The mention of twenty-one years for the length of Mgar Stong rtsan's tenure in office is interesting. He died in 667–668, and would thus have become great minister around 646–647. This would imply that he was chosen for this office a year or two after the subjugation of Zhang zhung (around 644, as far as it can be deducted from the *Annals*, see ms. PT 1288 l. 11–17; Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 29; Macdonald 1971: 309–310; and Dotson 2009: 82), which somehow confirms the *Chronicle's* testimony (ms. PT 1287 l. 433–446; Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 158–160), and that he was not yet great minister at the time of his embassies to China.

¹⁴ Ms. PT 1287 l. 104–106, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint, 1946: 131.

¹⁵ Ms. PT 1287 l. 284: "/ dbyi tshab kyi bu gchig la / gser gyi yI ge las smad re' /"

Kokonor area as of 670.¹⁶ In the year of the Rat (676–677) Btsan snya Ldom bu himself led an army in Turkestan. It was probably around that time that the “four garrisons” (Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, Karashahr) were conquered and that Mgar Btsan nyen Gung rton, yet another Mgar, was made governor of Khotan.¹⁷ In the meantime the *btsan po*, Khri Mang slon, died and an heir was born, and the Mgar family therefore became more powerful as a result. Two years later, the *Annals* states for the first time that Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu was great minister, and that two personalities were disgraced: one of them was Khu Khri snya Dgru zung, previously mentioned in relation with Mgar Mang zham Sum snang’s downfall more than thirty years earlier.¹⁸ The *Old Tibetan Annals* clearly show that from then on the Mgar were overrepresented in the administration of the country. Mgar Mang nyen Stag tsab held a council in 681 together with Gnubs Mang gnyen Bzhi brtsan,¹⁹ as did Mgar Sta gu Ri zung in 687 with Gnubs Mang gnyen Bzhi brtsan again and ‘bon Da rgyal Khri zung.²⁰ Mgar ‘Bring btsan Rtsang rton took care of collecting taxes with Pa tsab Rgyal tsan Thom po in 690.²¹ Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu died in the year of the Bird (685/686), following a mysterious incident involving Mang nyen Stag tsab.²²

Mgar Khri ‘bring Btsan brod immediately took over his brother’s office and bestowed upon the ten-year old heir the regal name Khri

¹⁶ Pelliot 1961: 7–8, Beckwith 1987: 35–36.

¹⁷ The *Li yul gyi lo rgyus* remembers him as such and states that a Buddhist monastery was built in Khotan in his time (Thomas 1935: 125).

¹⁸ See ms. ITJ 0750 l. 75–77, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 35; Dotson 2009: 93.

¹⁹ See ms. ITJ 0750 l. 78–80, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 35; Dotson 2009: 93. Gnubs Mang gnyen Bzhi brtsan appears to be an important character in the Tibetan administration of the late seventh century as his name is mentioned six times in the *Annals* between 681 and 697 (ms. ITJ 0750 l. 79, 82, 98, 116, 118, 124). Although not a very famous character in later histories, he seems to be remembered by some *bon po* scholars. The *Srid rgyud* mentions a scholar and/or ascetic G nub Mang nyer Gzhu btsan, and the early twentieth century historian Shar rdza Bkra shis Rgyal mtshan places a G nub Mar gshen Gzhi btsan, among a list of “twenty scholars” (Karmay 2001: 42, 80).

²⁰ See ms. ITJ 0750 l. 97–99, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint, 1946: 36; Dotson, 2009: 96.

²¹ See ms. ITJ 0750 l. 104–107, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 37; Dotson 2009: 97.

²² My translation from ms. ITJ 0750 l. 90–93: “The *btsan po* dwelling at Nyen kar, *dme’* happened [between] both the great minister Btsan snya and Mang nyen Stag tshab. At Sum chu bo of Shangs, great minister Btsan snya died.” (“*btsan po nyen kar na bzhu gs shIng / blon chen po btsan snya dang / mang nyen stag tsab gnyls / dme’ byung / shangs gyI sum chu bor / blon chen pho btsan snya gum l,*” see also Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 36; and Dotson 2009: 95). *Dme’* probably stands here for fratricide (and is indeed interpreted as *nang dme* by Dung dkar Blo zang ‘Phrin las 2002: 624; see also Dotson 2009: 95). The verb used to describe Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu’s death is *gum* and not *bkum* (which would stand for “murdered” or “executed.”) The text thus does not show that Btsan snya Ldom bu was killed, but might suggest that he died of a cause such as: old age, illness, suicide, or even the pollution of *dme’*.

'Dus srong (677–704). The new great minister then left for Turkestan where he remained until the year of the Ox (689–690). Only after the great minister's return did Khri 'Dus srong leave Nyen kar, the domain where he had remained for the major part of his life, but the young *btsan po* returned in the following year. In the year of the Snake (693–694) Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod left again, this time for the 'A zha land. On his side, the Tibetan monarch is seen travelling in various parts of his country starting from the year of the Horse (694). Two disastrous events struck the Mgar family on that year: Mgar Sta gu was captured by "Sog dag" (probably Sogdians) and Khotan was lost. Its governor, Mgar Btsan nyen Gung rton, was disgraced, judged, and executed by order of Khri 'Dus srong in the year of the Sheep (695).²³ By that time, the Chinese seem to have recaptured the Four Garrisons.²⁴

During the same year Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod crushed a Chinese army near Kokonor Lake. That great victory, celebrated in both the *Annals* and the *Chronicle*,²⁵ allowed the Tibetan general to open negotiations with an emissary of Wu Zetian (690–705) in a propitious position.²⁶ The core of the debate revolved around western Turks; Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod, maintaining that they were a Tibetan problem, required that Chinese renounced not only their claim over the Turks, but also that they left the Four Garrisons and the Tarim states. The Chinese made in turn another proposition: they were ready to abandon the Nushibi—the Turkish tribes that actually worried Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod—but wanted to keep the Four Garrisons, moreover Tibetans should give back the 'A zha people and the Kokonor area. Chinese, while proposing peace to an unacceptable price, had the intention of destabilising Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod who they probably knew was in a delicate position at the Tibetan court. The failure in the negotiations would indeed have tragic consequences for the Mgar family.

Repression and flight of the Mgar family (698–early eighth century)

In 698, the *btsan po* Khri 'Dus srong invited the Mgar family and their allies for a great hunt, and had them put to death.²⁷ He summoned Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod and one of his brothers, known by the *Tangshu* under the name Zanpo,²⁸ who were still

²³ See ms. ITJ 0750 l. 119–122, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 38; Dotson 2009: 98–99.

²⁴ Beckwith 1987: 54.

²⁵ Ms. PT 1287 l. 495–523, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 167–170. See also the Chinese version in Pelliot 1961: 11.

²⁶ Beckwith 1987: 58–60; and Bogoslovskij 1972: 46.

²⁷ See Pelliot 1961: 11, 94. See also Beckwith 1987: 60; and Bogoslovskij 1972: 47.

²⁸ It is sometime suggested that the Chinese misinterpreted Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod's name, making two characters out of one with Qinling for Khri

victoriously fighting Chinese troops in Tsong ka, but they didn't answer the call. Khri 'Dus srong then led an army against Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod but the confrontation never took place; abandoned by his men, the general and his loyal followers committed suicide. The *Chronicle* shows Khri 'Dus srong celebrating his triumph in a famous song of victory.²⁹

The surviving members of the Mgar family and their allies decided to flee to China and became vassals of Wu Zetian. Chinese documentation³⁰ names three Mgar among the refugees: Gongren son of Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod, Zanpo, and Mangbuzhi. The latter is probably to be identified with Mgar Mang po rje ("Mangbuzhi") Stag rtsan mentioned in a short, but damaged, passage of the *Chronicle* referring precisely to the flight of the Mgar.³¹ Zanpo protected the border against Tibetans and died soon after³² while Gongren (658–723) led a brilliant career in China.³³ During the seventh century, a dozen of members of the Mgar family are known from ancient sources. Among them, five were great minister, sometime also general (*dmag dpon*), and one was the governor of Khotan. The others were officials with unknown functions but able to perform administrative tasks or military actions.

'bring, and Zanpo for Btsan brod. However, while that could be true in some cases, the fact that Chinese sources ascribe two different fates to them makes it unlikely. A hint might be found in Tshal pa Kun dga' Rdo rje's (1309–1364) *Drung chen smon lam rdo rje'i rnam thar* as this work (quoted by Dung dkar Blo bzang 'Phrin las 2002: 1516–1517, who still transcribes Zanpo by Btsan brod on p. 622–623) would mention a son of Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung named Btsan po Yon tan Rgyal bzung, said to have been a minister of the "Tang queen" Wu Zetian. The name also occurs in Rgyal dbang Lnga pa Chen mo 1991: 106–107, but as the extract is about Tshal pa's line, it might have been borrowed to the *Drung chen smon lam rdo rje'i rnam thar*.

²⁹ See ms. PT 1287 l. 456–494, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 161–167. According to this difficult text, the Mgar seemed to have had their fief in a place called the Bya pu Valley (Bya pu lung). The name recalls the one of the Bya country (Bya yul) which is very close to Gnyal, in Lho ka, where a local tradition places Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's birthplace ([Shar yul] Phun tshogs Tshe ring 2000: 60). Another possibility is that Bya pu lung is related to the Bya tsal of Sgregs mentioned in the *Old Tibetan Annals* (ms. ITJ 075 l. 131, translated in Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 39; and Dotson 2009: 100), where the wealth of the disgraced ones (most probably the Mgar) are said to be "calculated". Sgregs—and Bya tsal—would lie roughly half way between Lha sa and Phying ba, north of the Gtsang po (see G. Hazod's map in Dotson 2009: 202–203).

³⁰ Cf. Beckwith 1987: 61; Bogoslovskij 1972: 47; and Demiéville 1987: 380.

³¹ See Richardson 1998: 28–36.

³² Pelliot 1961: 12.

³³ Demiéville 1987: 380 citing a Chinese source: the *Zhang yan-gong ji*.

Later developments on the Mgar family

Early history of the Mgar family is the starting point of a wide array of later developments in both written histories and oral traditions.³⁴ Regardless of any connection with historical facts, those tales, amongst which motives possibly predating even the early Mgar somehow sometime found their place, are a true object of study. This kind of account questions the relations between oral and written literatures. There is even a testimony suggesting that *blon po* Mgar's story has been narrated in the fashion of the Ge sar epic in the twentieth century.³⁵

Origins of the Mgar family

The origins of the Mgar family are described in a large variety of fashions. The so-called "catalogues of principalities" usually link the Mgar family to the proto-historical kingdom of Ngas po, renamed 'Phan yul after its conquest by Gnam ri Slon btsan.³⁶ The *Blon po bka' thang*³⁷ gives another hint on the origins of Mgar as it states: "Five ministers arose in Ba gor: Mgar Srong btsan Yul gzung, Khri 'bring Btsan srol, Btsan snya Ldom bu, Khri thog rje A nu, five with Khri sgra Zin lung."³⁸ Some oral traditions places Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zungs's birthplace near Lding kha, in Stod lung, where ruins are thought to be those of the Mgar family's castle.³⁹ If 'Phan yul is to be equated to modern 'Phan po, then all the above mentioned places belong to an area of central Tibet, north of the Gtsang po River.

Some later accounts give to the Mgar family a divine ancestor. For the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), he was named Mgar Tshe gnam tsha 'brug, and is said to have descended to earth from the sky.⁴⁰ The nineteenth century works of Gu ru Bkra shis and Tshe dbang Rdo rje Rig 'dzin describes mount Mi nyag Bzhag [b]ra, east

³⁴ A chart at the end of the paper is compiling the main later developments.

³⁵ Buffetrille 1999: 121 (oral communication from Y. Gyatso).

³⁶ Ms. PT 1287, l. 185; Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint 1946: 138.

³⁷ "ba gor la blon po lnga byung ste / mgar srong btsan yul gzung dang / khri 'bring btsan srol dang / btsan snya ldom bu dang / khri thog rje a nu dang / khri sgra zin lung dang lnga'" (U rgyan Gling pa 1986: 436–437).

³⁸ The Mgar are distinguished in this list in a curious manner: they are the only ones whose family name ('Gar) differs from their place of origin (Ba gor). Khri sgra Zin lung might stand for the quite problematic Khri sgra 'Dzi rmun, first great minister of the Mgar family according to the *Dunhuang Chronicle*.

³⁹ Dung dkar Blo zang 'Phrin las 2002: 622–623, and [Shar yul] Phun tshogs Tshe ring 2000: 60.

⁴⁰ Rgyal dbang Lnga pa Chen mo 1991: 106–107. The Great Fifth might have taken this information from Tshal pa Kun dga' Rdo rje's *Drung chen smon lam rdo rje'i rnam thar*.

of Lha sngang (ch. Tagong) in modern Sichuan, on the border between Tibet and China, as the place of his descent.⁴¹

Yet another potential candidate as Mgar legendary progenitor might be found in the person of 'Gar Bu chung: according to the *bon po* historian Shar rdza Bkra shis Rgyal mtshan (1859–1935),⁴² he was the youngest son of G.yung drung Dbang ldan, himself son of Ston pa Gshen rab. Nothing is said about him or his descendants but 'Gar is a common spelling for Mgar in later works. By comparing with his brothers' lines, he might be thought to have lived four generations before the mythical king Mu khri Btsan po, son of Gnya' khri Btsan po.⁴³

The Mgar are also mentioned amongst the offspring of the primordial tribes but there is no unanimity concerning which. In the eighteenth century works of Si tu Pan chen Chos kyi 'Byung gnas and Zhu chen Tshul khri Rin chen, 'Gar is a "sub-rigs" born from Sgo Lha sde Dkar po.⁴⁴ According to Shar yul Phun tshogs Tshe ring, the 'Gar came down from Rmu tribe,⁴⁵ while for Tarthang Tulku they are either the offspring of the Bse or of the Ldong tribes.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the sources used in both of these works are unclear.

Around the legends of the Rgya bza' bal bza' type

Tales of Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's embassies in Nepal and China are amongst the most famous cycles of Tibetan literature. The theme even became the main part of a traditional drama: *Rgya bza' bal bza'*.

The *Dbā' bzhed* probably bears the oldest legendary version of the story. The wedding with the Nepali princess Khri btsun is barely more than a chronological mark, while the episode of the embassy to China is relatively short. When the Tibetan envoys reach the Chinese court, the emperor writes an answer, and asks them to carry it to Tibet. The envoys, answering that there is no need to go back to Tibet, hand him an answer written by Srong btsan Sgam po before their departure. The same scene is repeated twice before the Chinese emperor eventually agrees to give his

⁴¹ Van der Kuijp 1988: 7. See also Epstein and Peng Wenbin 1999: 340.

⁴² Translated in Karmay 2001: 5.

⁴³ A tradition considers that in the time of Stong rtsan Yul zung and his sons, the Mgar were ardent followers of the *Bon* religion. The fifteenth century *Bon po* historian Bstan rgyal Bzang po, in his *Bstan pa'i rnam bshad dar rgyas gsal ba'i sgron me*, states: "As the Mgar, father and sons, spread *Bon*, the disciples were thus numerous" ("*mgar yab sras gyis bon spel ba'i slob ma yang mang*," as quoted by Shar yul Phun tshogs Tshe ring 2003: 97–98).

⁴⁴ Cf. Van der Kuijp 1988: 2. See also Stein 1961: 20–22, 70–84.

⁴⁵ Shar yul Phun tshogs Tshe ring 2003: 11–12.

⁴⁶ Tarthang Tulku 1986: 127, 130.

daughter in marriage, and bestows upon Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung the title of great minister.⁴⁷

Per Sørensen has already pointed out the variations between the story as told by the *Bka' chems ka khol ma*, the *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi bcud*, the *Ma ni bka' 'bum*, and the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*. One should refer to this remarkable study for in depth comparison of this material.⁴⁸ These texts present a very similar version and obviously derive from the same prototype. The story seems to be quite old as it already appears in a fully developed form in the twelfth century *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi bcud*. By convention, I will call this version by the name of legend of the “*Rgya bza' bal bza' type*.” As far as the Mgar are concerned, the story always displays the following pattern:⁴⁹ After a dream of the sixteen years old Srong btsan Sgam po, the Tibetan ministers decide to acquire both Khri btsun, daughter of the king of Nepal, and Kong jo, daughter of the Chinese emperor, as brides for their lord. Mgar informs the young Tibetan monarch of their decision to seek Khri btsun. Srong btsan Sgam po in turn entrusts him with letters which are to be given to each of the Nepalese king's objections. Mgar leaves in company of a hundred horsemen and is granted an audience. As foreseen by Srong btsan Sgam po, the Nepalese king is first reluctant to send his daughter to the barbarous land of snow, but terrified by Srong btsan Sgam po's letters he finally agrees—to Khri btsun's great despair—and the delegation returns to Tibet with the princess. Later, Srong btsan Sgam po allows Mgar to go to China to fetch Kong jo. The minister is again entrusted with letters for the Chinese emperor, but the Tibetan emissaries find themselves in competition with envoys sent by the pious Indian *dharmarāja*, the handsome Gesar king of war, the rich Persian king and the strong king of Bata hor. As a consequence, Srong btsan Sgam po's letters, though greatly terrifying the Chinese emperor, are not enough to win the hand of the princess. A contest was therefore held to determine between the pretenders. Despite Mgar's victory the Chinese emperor breaks his promise and decides to organise other trials. Although the Tibetans win each and every one of them thanks to Mgar's intelligence and skills, the princess is still not given until a final trial is held. The emissaries, who never saw the princess, have to recognise her hidden amongst hundreds of other girls. Mgar manages to get a description of Kong jo from the hostess of the Tibetan delegation, whom he was having an affair with. At the time of the final contest, all the emissaries fail but Mgar, who after reviewing several maiden, stopped in front of Kong jo, hooked her by the collar with the notch of an arrow he had in hand, and

⁴⁷ Pasang Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 29–32.

⁴⁸ Sørensen 1994: 213–249.

⁴⁹ For a translation from the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*, see Sørensen 1994: 213–249. See also Nyang Nyi ma 'Od zer 1988: 197–227; Sa skya Bsod nams Rgyal mtshan 2005: 78–131.

lead the crying princess out of the row. Having won the hand of Kong jo, the Tibetans prepare for departure. But 'Bri Se ru Gung ston, jealous of Mgar, suggests the Chinese emperor to keep the clever minister in China as a compensation for the loss of his daughter. Aware of the treachery, but realising the opportunity to destabilise the country, Mgar willingly decides to stay, and arranges a future meeting with his trustworthy companions, Thon mi and Nyang. Having indeed caused great disturbances and made a fool of the Chinese emperor, his astrologers, and his troops, the Tibetan minister eventually manages to escape. He joins Kong jo and her escort in the Tibetan marches, however angry Chinese protective deities are blocking the road to Tibet and have to be propitiated along with their Tibetan counterparts in order to clear the way. The escort proceeds and the princess can finally be handed to Srong btsan Sgam po.

It is possible that the story of the embassy to China in legends of the "Rgya bza' bal bza' type" was developed from the story as it appears in the *Dbā' bzhed* by adding trials in order to win the hand of the princess.⁵⁰ However, it is also possible that the structure of the *Dbā' bzhed* version was reused for the story of the Nepalese wedding in the "Rgya bza' bal bza' type."

According to some accounts, Wencheng Kong jo and Mgar had a child on their way to Tibet. It might be a relatively old development as the story already appears in both Nyang ral's *chos 'byung* and at least one edition of the *Bka' chems ka khol ma*.⁵¹ As an oral tradition it is still alive. Although few sites in A mdo and Khams claim to be the child's death-spot, there also seems to be a local tradition which ascribes him a different fate: the baby, born somewhere in the Tibetan area of modern Yunnan, was sent adrift on the river and found down-stream by local people who placed him on the throne of 'Jang (Nanzhao).⁵²

Oral tradition goes on, saying that Mgar, despite his many tricks, was eventually blinded and banished in modern A mdo to punish him for his affair with Kong jo.⁵³ Katia Buffetrille relates several legends which all have roughly the same plot: the minister is exiled in a place which is then only a large plain, he asks his son to get

⁵⁰ S. G. Karmay already drew a parallel between the arrow used by Mgar in the final trial, and those used in wedding ceremonies as a male symbol (Karmay 1998: 147–153). Furthermore, some of the trials imposed by the Chinese emperor to the foreign delegations (the drinking contest and the final trial) recall similar tests occurring in wedding ceremonies—at least in Ladakh and Zanskar—imposed to the horsemen sent by the groom's party in order to fetch the bride. Mgar, however, doesn't seem to be explicitly mentioned in such occasions (Kaplanian 1981: 247–257; see also Stein 1996: 132–134).

⁵¹ Cf. Sørensen 1994: 242; Richardson 1998: 114; Nyang Nyi ma'Od zer 1988: 227.

⁵² The story was told to me by a young Tibetan *bon po* from the area, in Dharamsala in October 2008. He had heard the story from his grand-father.

⁵³ Buffetrille 1999: 107–111. See also one of the stories where Mgar takes in his exile the plans of the Jo khang.

water from a source hidden under a rock and to put that rock back in place afterward. The son forgets his father's advice and rising waters invade the plain, thus forming the Kokonor Lake. A *grub thob*, Padmasambhava in some versions, eventually shows up and miraculously obstructs the source.

Early Mgar as warlords in later legends

The surprisingly few written narratives concerning the family's military expeditions are usually rather short and distorted. Accounts of the aggressive careers of Mgar's sons are to be found in Lde'u Jo sras's chronicle⁵⁴: "'Gar Btsan snya Ldom bu and 'Gar Khri 'bring Btsan rgod acted ten years as ministers. Gar log and Hor were subjugated. In the north, the territory having been extended, one would enter through the Da shab hab pass."⁵⁵ The downfall of the family Mgar, despite being one of the major political events of the time, is a theme that appears to be largely ignored by later historians.

The legend of the Chinese invasion of Lhasa after the death of Srong btsan Sgam po (leading to the hiding of the Jo bo) has been extensively studied by Richardson.⁵⁶ It probably comes from a misinterpretation of Chinese documentation referring to the events of 670, when an army sent to invade Lha sa was crushed by Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod near the Kokonor Lake. According to Richardson's work, the earliest version is the one found in Tshal Kun dga' rdo rje's *Red Annals* (fourteenth century).⁵⁷ The *Deb ther dmar po gsar ma* (sixteenth century) is representative of such a tradition and contains an account on Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's late career and death⁵⁸: "In the time of this king [Gung srong Gung btsan], Chinese armies came to Tibet and burnt the Dmar po ri. [...] Again minister Mgar [Stong rtsan Yul zung], leading a hundred thousand of Tibetan warriors, plundered the Chinese realm. It is said that Mgar himself died in that battle."⁵⁹ The story also contradicts both the *Annals* and the *Chronicle* regarding Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung's death.

⁵⁴ Lde'u Jo sras 1987: 119.

⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, a similar account is given in Mkhas pa Lde'u 1987: 299–300: "'Gar Btsan gnya' Ldem bu and 'Gar Khri 'bring acted ten years as *blon po*. In Lag ris, Hor and Ga gon were subjugated. In the north, the territory was extended." ("gar btsan gnya' ldem bu dang 'gar khri 'bring gis blon po lo bcu byas / lag ris su hor dang ga gon btul / byang phyogs su yul rgya bskyed /"). The mention of ten years which appears in both Lde'u Jo sras and Mkhas pa Lde'u is not supported by the *Old Tibetan Annals*.

⁵⁶ Richardson 1998: 39–47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 39.

⁵⁸ Pan chen Bsod nams Grags pa 1982: 22–23.

⁵⁹ An oral tradition states that Mgar became the *gzhi bdag* Blon po Gser chen after his death (Buffetrille 1999: 121).

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, earlier materials including the Dunhuang documents and Chinese sources focus on Mgar military and political influence, and offer an account of brilliant statesmen. The period following the disintegration of the Tibetan empire saw the development of legends concerning the Mgar family, and especially Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung. This was probably the time when legends of the “*Rgya bza’ bal bza’* type” were elaborated before being widely accepted in learned historiographical works from the twelfth century onwards. The influence of oral accounts on written material is by its very nature difficult, if not impossible, to trace. However, although it is ultimately unprovable, the story of Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung and Wencheng Kong jo’s child could very well have its origins in oral legends.

Finding several legends around the Mgar in eastern Tibet is not much of a surprise as it is well known that the kings of Sde dge claimed to descend from them. However those accounts can’t be reduced to propaganda as *blon po* Mgar, as a true folk hero, is found in local tales in a large geographical area spanning from modern Yunnan to the Kokonor lake. Less known is *blon po* Mgar’s place in *bon po* literature, and much remains to be studied.

From a strictly historical point of view, the Mgar family’s achievements are of great importance. By their conquests, the Mgar not only pushed forward an imperial power’s borders, but also took part in the extension of the Tibetan cultural territory itself, mainly in direction of modern A mdo. As legendary figures, their presence pervades Tibetan imaginary, thus forming a remarkable part of Tibetan identity and heritage.

Charts

Rulers of the Seventh Century

Tibet	China
Gnam ri Slon btsan (early 7 th c.?)	Sui Wendi (581–604)
Khri Srong btsan Sgam po (618?–649)	Sui Yangdi (604–618)
[Gung srong Gung brtsan (641–646)?]	Tang Gaozu (618–626)
Khri Mang slon (649–677)	Tang Taizong (626–649)
Khri ’Dus srong (677–704)	Tang Gaozong (649–683)
	Tang Zhongzong (684)
	Tang Ruizong (684–690)
	Wu Zetian (690–705)

The Mgar family according to old Tibetan and Chinese sources

Name	Data
Mgar	Minister in the Ngas po principality (early 7 th c.)
Mgar Khri sgra 'Dzi rmun	Great minister under Gnam ri Slon btsan
Mgar Mang sham Sum snang	Great minister under Srong btsan Sgam po (618? –649)
Mgar Stong rtsan Yul zung	Great minister from 646-647 to his death in 667–668
Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu	Mgar Stong rtsan Yul sung's son Great minister from 668–669 (or before) to his death in 685–686
Mgar Mang nyen Stag tsab	Death in 685–686 involving Mgar Btsan snya Ldom bu
Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod	Mgar Stong rtsan Yul sung's son Great minister from 686 up to his suicide in 699
Mgar Btsan nyen Gung rton	Governor of Khotan Executed in 695
Mgar Sta gu Ri zung	Captured by Sog dag (Sogdians?) in 694
Mgar 'Bring btsan Rtsang rton	Tibetan official mentioned in 690
Zanpo (Chinese name)	Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod's brother military career in China under Wu Zetian (690–705)
Gongren (Chinese name)	(658–723) Mgar Khri 'bring Btsan brod's son
Mgar Mang po rje Stag rtsan = Mangbuzhi?	Refugee in China <i>circa</i> 700

Later developments

Century	Data concerning the Mgar family
9 th –11 th c.?	First catalogues of principalities (Dunhuang documents) Early Tibetan legends on <i>blon po</i> Mgar's embassy to China (<i>Dbal bzhed</i>)
11 th –12 th c.	Stories of the "Rgya bza' bal bza' type" are formed Legends on <i>blon po</i> Mgar and Wencheng Kong jo's child?
13 th c.	<i>Blon po</i> Mgar sons as warlords (both of Lde'u chronicles)
14 th c.	Mgar origins in Ba gor (<i>Blon po bka' thang</i>) List of Mgar ministers (<i>Blon po bka' thang</i>) The Chinese invasion of Lhasa (<i>Red Annals</i>)
15 th c.	<i>Blon po</i> Mgar and his sons promoting <i>bon</i> religion (Bstan rgyal Bzang po)
17 th c.	Divine origins of the 'Gar family (Great Fifth's chronicle, compiled from 14 th c. material?)
18 th c.	Mgar linked with primordial tribes (Si tu Pan chen Chos kyi 'Byung gnas, Zhu chen Tshul khrims Rin chen)
19 th c.	Mythical ancestor linked with mount Mi nyag bzhag ra (Gu ru Bkra shis, Tshe dbang Rdo rje Rig 'dzin)
20 th c.	Oral accounts in central and eastern (i.e. Khams and A mdo) Tibet.

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Online resources

Old Tibetan Documents Online <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>



