Glimpses on The History of Tibet

an Introduction

On January 20, 2009, His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited Auroville to inaugurate the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. Before leaving, he suggested that we work on an exhibition on the History of Tibet. The present display is our answer to His Holiness.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo spoke of 'India of the Ages', an India which he described thus: "*Spirituality is the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it. India saw from the beginning that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical; she saw that the complexity of the universe could not be explained in the present terms of man or seen by his superficial sight, that there were other powers behind, other powers within man himself of which he is normally unaware, that he is conscious only of a small part of himself, that the invisible always surrounds the visible, the suprasensible the sensible, even as infinity always surrounds the finite.*"

This could also apply to Tibet which for millennia, and long before the introduction of Buddhism, looked 'inside' to discover the secrets of the Spirit. This is clearly the thread linking these glimpses of the political history of the Roof of the World.

We have faced several difficulties in preparing the exhibition. One was how to slice several millennia of history (His Holiness suggested that the latest archaeological discoveries be mentioned) in 25 portions without betraying the flow of events and people. Impossible, said the experts, unfortunately (in fact fortunately) we had no choice but to try. This exhibition should be seen as 25 snapshots of this ancient nation's history.

The two thankas presented by His Holiness gave a direction to our search. The first, depicts Santarakshita and Padmasambhava, who established the roots of Buddhism in Tibet, particularly the Nalanda lineage and the Indian Tantrik tradition respectively; the second thanka of the Three Religious Kings demonstrates the military strength of the Tibetan Empire at one point in history; in His Holiness's words: "*There have been occasions when Tibetan rulers conquered vast areas of China and other neighbouring states. This, however, does not mean that we Tibetans can lay claim to these territories.*"

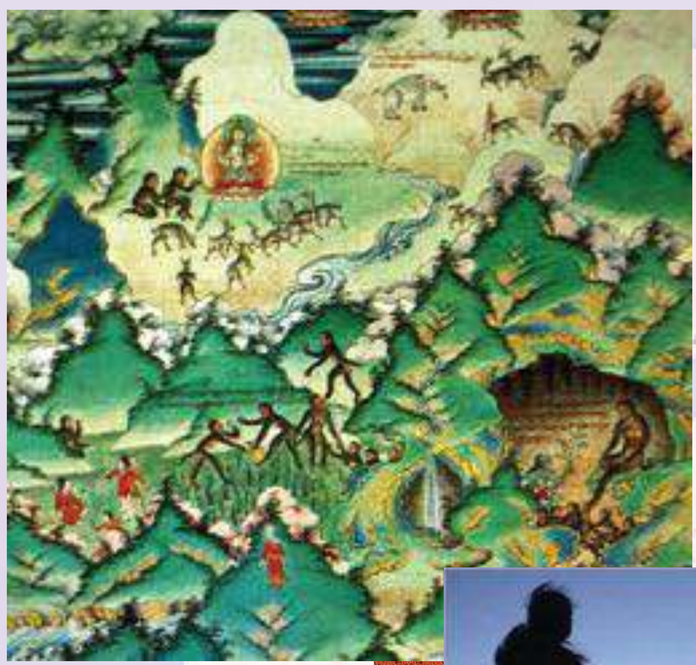
These Glimpses demonstrate that in the past Tibet was an independent nation and though for sometime it lived in isolation, during most of the last 4000 years Tibet had constant contacts and interactions with the neighbouring nations and in many cases was influenced by other cultures.

Our history, dating back more than two thousand years, has been one of independence. At no time, since the founding of our nation in 127 BC, have we Tibetans conceded our sovereignty to a foreign power. As with all nations, Tibet experienced periods in which our neighbors — Mongol, Manchu, Chinese, British and the Gorkhas of Nepal sought to establish influence over us. These eras have been brief and the Tibetan people have never accepted them as constituting a loss of our national sovereignty.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The Origin

Myths and Upheavals

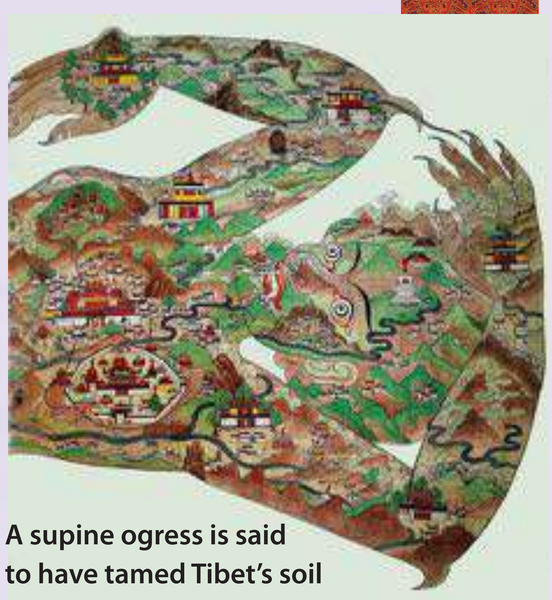


The Divine monkey mated with the mountain ogress to produce the first Tibetans

Courtesy: LTWA

The Tethys Sea was lifted up to become the Roof of the World

What is a Nation?
The Romans called 'natio', a race or a human group with a common 'birth'. Today, the dictionary says that it is "a body of people who share a real or imagined common history, culture, language or ethnic origin, who typically inhabit a particular country or territory".
This is the case for Tibet.

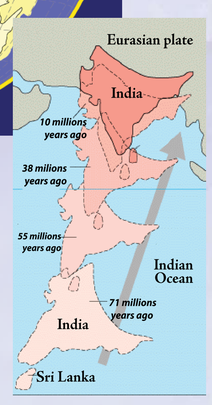


A supine ogress is said to have tamed Tibet's soil by lying on her back to make it habitable

Tibetans have an 'imagined common history', they descend from a male monkey, an incarnation of Avalokitesvara who married a mountain ogress. Their six offspring were the first Tibetans. The inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau are said to have the characteristics of both their ancestors. Except for the divine origin in the Tibetan legend, the modern Theory of Evolution is not too different.

As the supercontinent Gondwanaland broke up 100 million years ago, India separated from Africa. The Indian plate moved north and one day collided with the Asian plate. In the process the Tethys Sea was elevated to 5000 m. The Tibetan plateau was born.
A Tibetan legend speaks of a Tibet covered by a giant lake which dried up. The remaining lakes were prophesized to progressively shrink and give space to humans to live and practice their religion.

The Indian continent collided with Asia

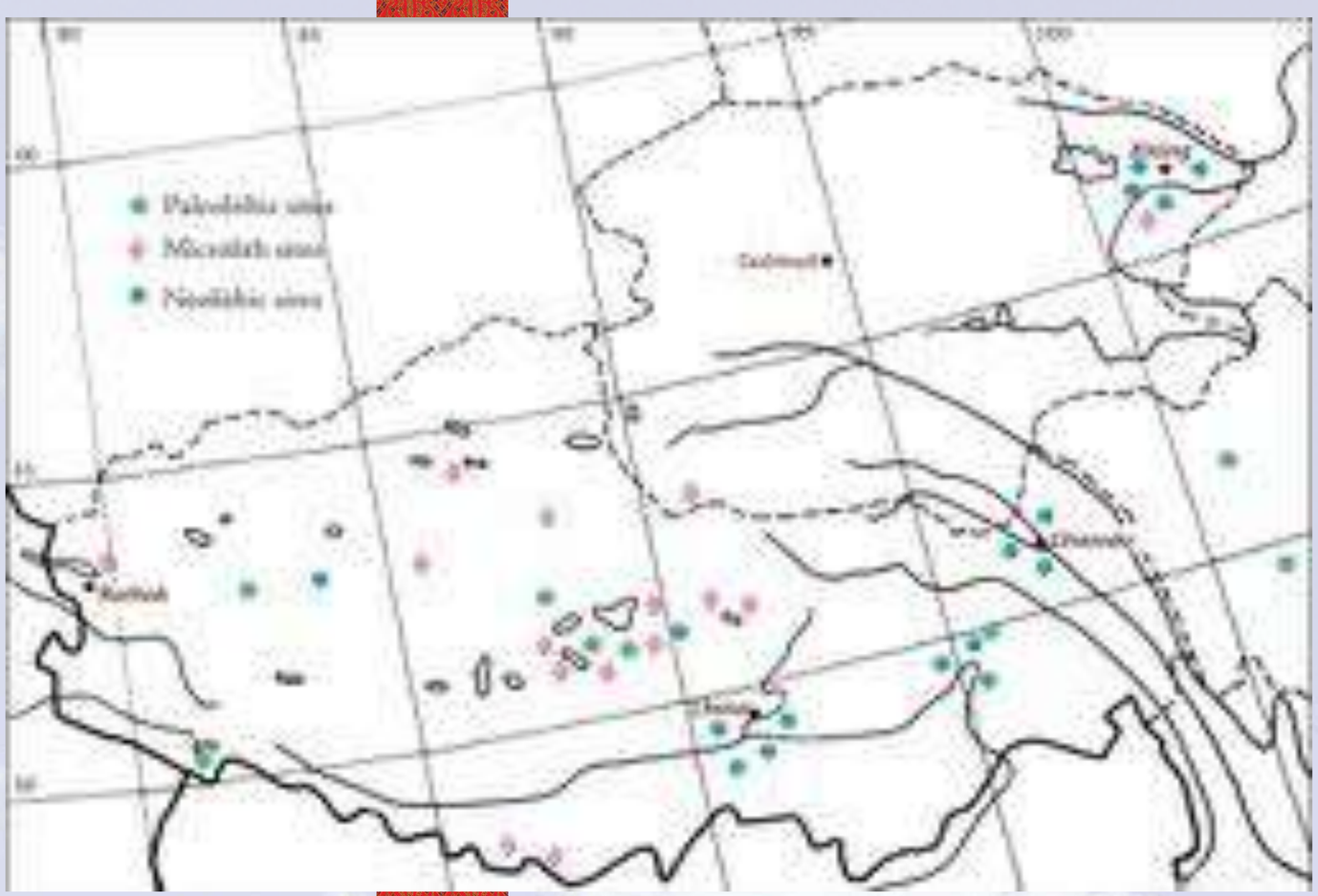


The Roof of the World emerged millions years ago

The most awesome mountains of the planet

The First Steps

Archeology of Tibet



Map of archeological sites in Tibet

© John Bellezza

Pre-Buddhist pillar, probably at a burial site (near Lake Dangra)

Archeological study of the Tibetan plateau is a relatively new discipline. Though explorers such as Tucci, Hedin, Richardson or Roerich did the first archeological surveys at the beginning of the 20th century, their studies remained superficial.

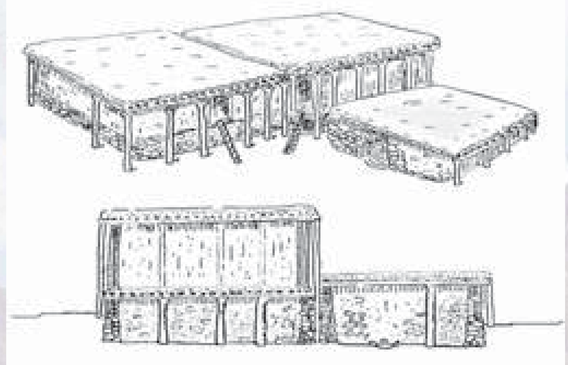
The scenario has changed during the past 2 or 3 decades with more scientific studies being conducted by Tibetan, Western and Chinese archeologists. Their research dwells not only upon Western Tibet, rich in 'pre-Buddhist' vestiges, but also on other parts of the plateau, like Amdo and Kham.

Courtesy Songtsen Library

Cutting tools (later Paleolithic)

Courtesy Songtsen Library

Two pronged stone hoe found in Chamdo

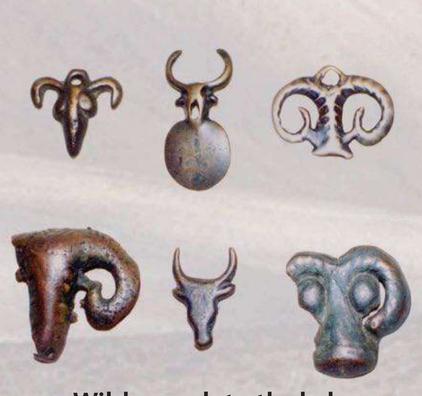


Plan of a semi-buried house in Kharo near Chamdo, probably 4000 years old

Courtesy Songtsen Library

Stone chisel (mid Stone Age)

Black pottery (mid Neolithic/Chamdo)

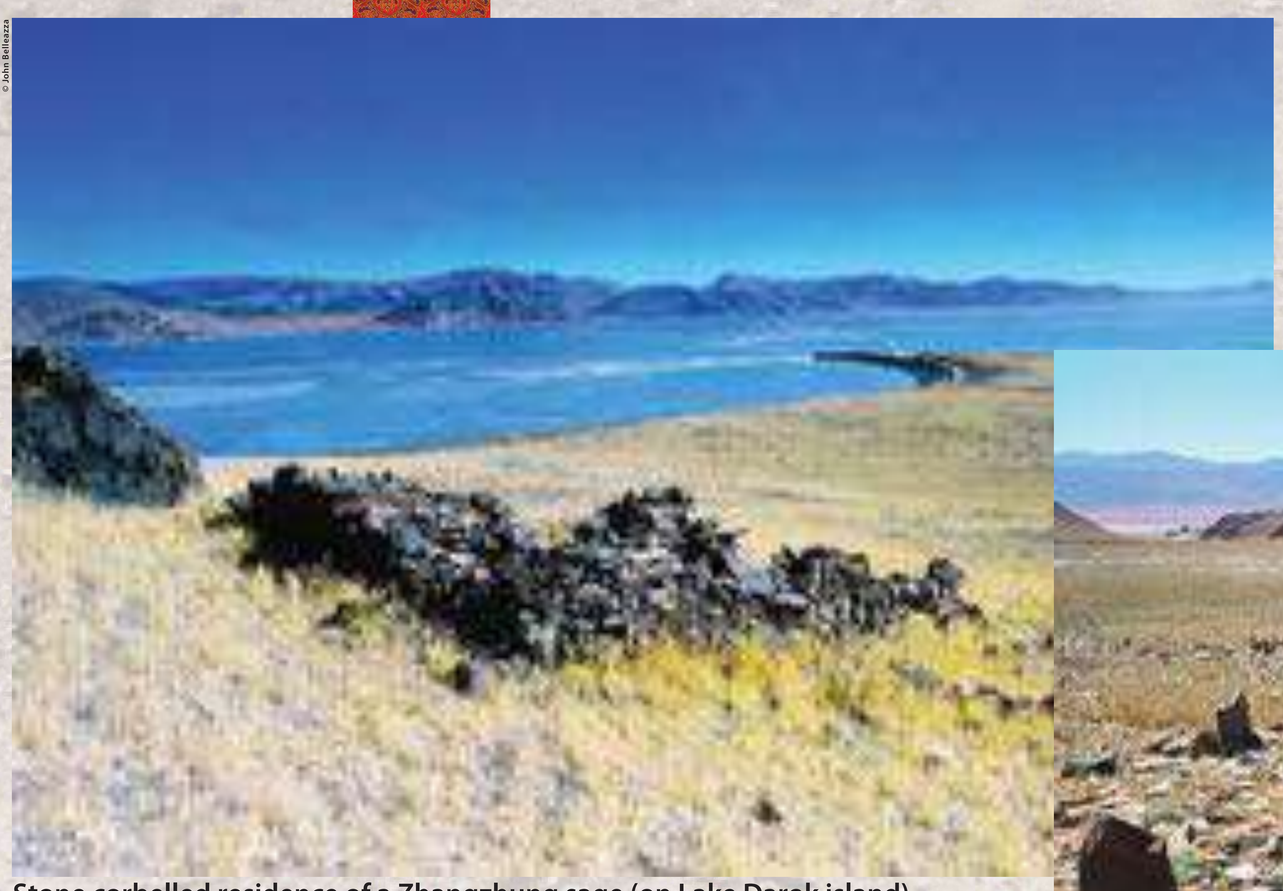


© John Bellezza

Wild ungulate thokchas (copper alloy talismans)

The latest archeological discoveries open new perspectives on the history of the plateau, particularly regarding the Zhangzhung kingdom. Some archeologists believed that a climate change altered the balance of power a few millennia ago. Due to drought and the subsequent increased salinity in the areas around the large lakes of Northern Tibet, the political center may have progressively shifted to warmer and moister regions like Yarlung.

Pottery with handles (early Metal Age/Chamdo)



© John Bellezza

Stone corbelled residence of a Zhangzhung sage (on Lake Darok island)

© John Bellezza

Pillars probably in a pre-Buddhist cemetery (Rokhung)

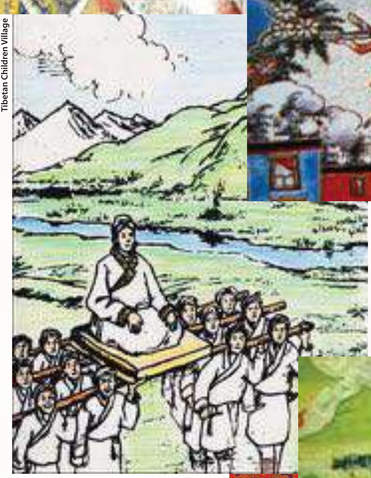
Long necked pottery (mid Neololitic/ Chamdo)

Background Photo: Dinesh Gupta

The Pugyal Dynasty

The Kings of Yarlung

Nyatri Tsanpo



Representations of the legend of the First King

Yumbulagang Palace in Yarlung Valley

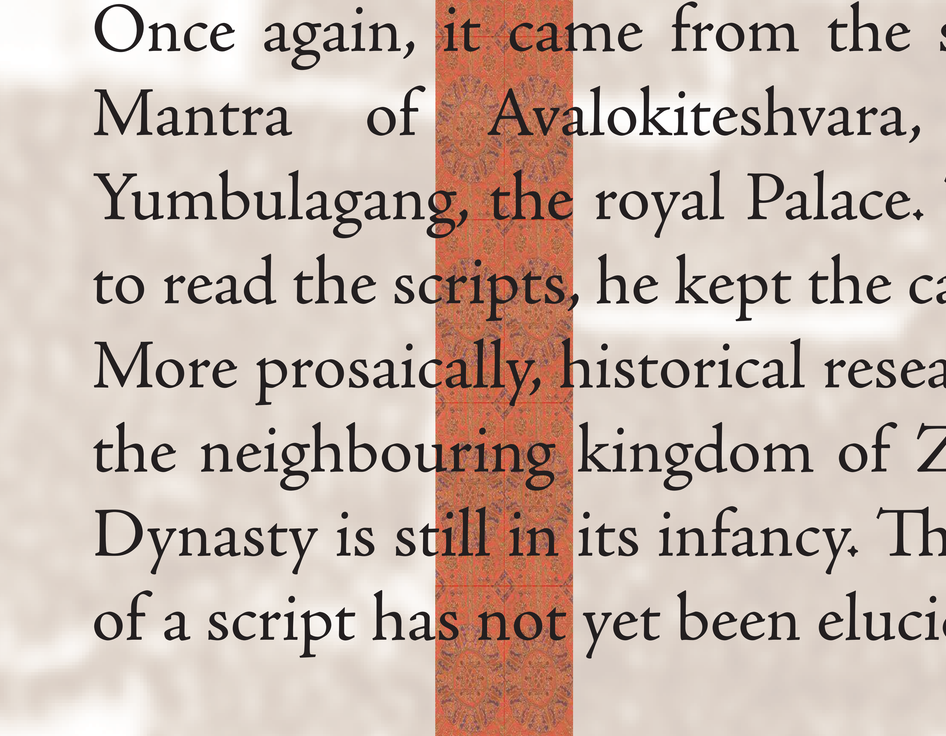
Legend says that in 127 BCE, the inhabitants of Yarlung Valley elevated Nyatri Tsanpo as the first king of Pugyal (or Yarlung) Dynasty. Nyatri, the story continues, descended as a god-like being from the sky using a 'sky-rope.' When he landed, he met some herdsmen grazing their yaks; they took him on their shoulders and made him king. The seven first kings are said to have used a rope to leave this world after their death. They have left no tombs.

The first kings followed the Bon faith; Buddhism appeared only during the reign of Thori Nyatsen (5th century AD). Once again, it came from the sky. A casket containing the Mantra of Avalokiteshvara, Tibet's Patron fell on Yumbulagang, the royal Palace. Though the king was unable to read the scripts, he kept the casket as a Holy Relic.

More prosaically, historical research on the relations between the neighbouring kingdom of Zhangzhung and the Yarlung Dynasty is still in its infancy. The hypothesis of the existence of a script has not yet been elucidated.

Protective Armor used by the first Kings

Helmet and Arrows



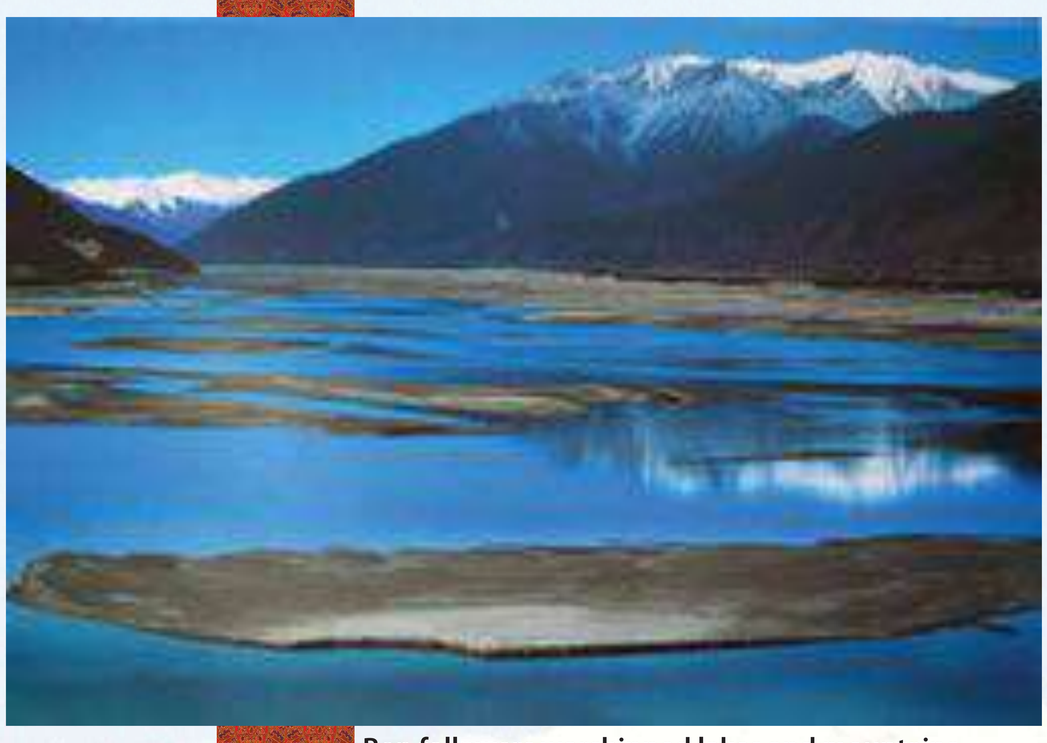
Google map of Yarlung Valley

Mounds of the tombs of the Kings in Chongye, Yarlung Valley

Little is known of the relations between Yarlung and Central Asia (here Dunhuang)

The Bon Religion

A First Unifying Factor



Bon followers worshipped lakes and mountains. Here the sacred Yarlha Sampho peaks

Tonpa Sherab Miwoche founder of the Bon Faith

Bon monuments are often found near lakes

Bon is considered the native faith of Tibet which has survived till the present day. For some, Bon is only a body of folk beliefs such as divination, propitiations, offerings, curses; for others, Bon is seen as a more complex religious system with priests called Bonpo, who are believed to have supernatural powers. For still others, Bon is a belief system which matured in the 11th century; this 'organized Bon' has characteristics closely resembling Tibetan Buddhism.

Some scholars divide the history of Bon into three periods. First, the pre-Buddhist era where Bon was a folk religion; the second period was characterized by the emergence of an organized priesthood and a more sophisticated doctrine. It was during this period that the Bon establishment confronted, often violently, Buddhism. The third stage took place after Buddhism became the State religion. Adherents of Bon had to assimilate several Buddhist features to ensure their survival. In turn Buddhism was deeply influenced by Bon.

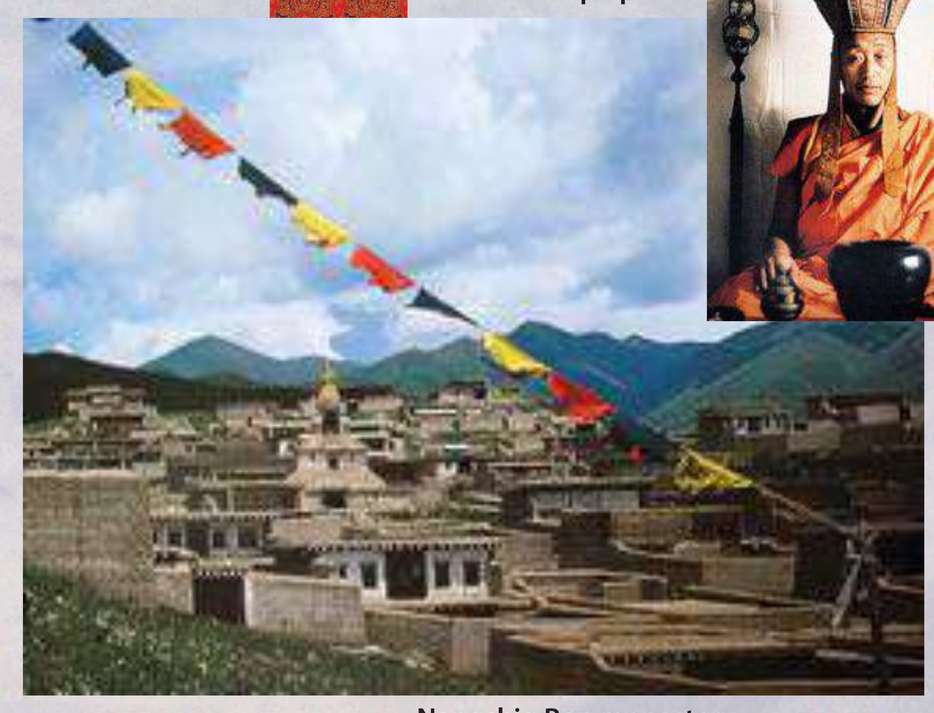
Sherab Gyaltsen, the founder of the Menri monastery in the 15th century

Maryig scripts used by the Bonpos

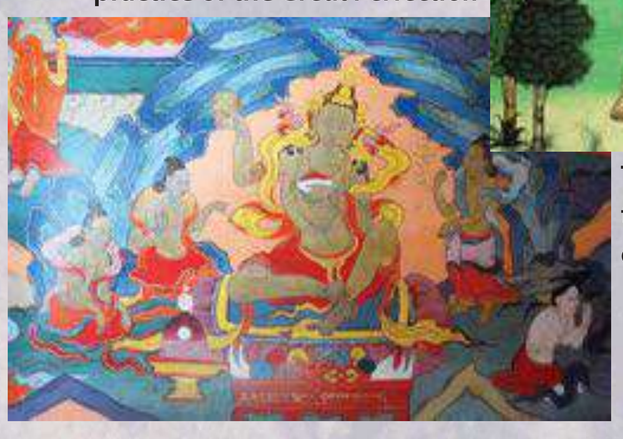
Early Bon was closely linked with the Kingdom of Zhangzhung and later with the Yarlung Dynasty. Future research on Zhangzhung may shed more light on the historical relationship with other Himalayan beliefs and civilizations.

Rock engraving

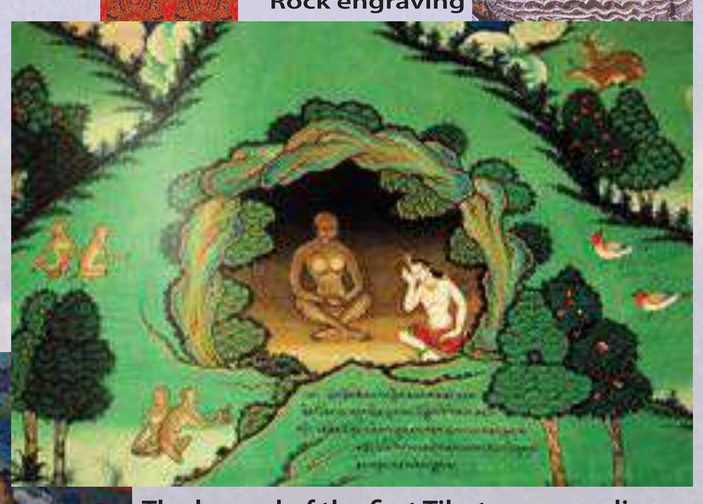
Bonpo priest



Nangshig Bon monastery in Northeastern Tibet



Bonpo yogis are known for their practice of the *Great Perfection*



The legend of the first Tibetans according to the Bonpos is similar to the Buddhist one. Which one inspired the other?

A Great Military Empire

The Three Religious Kings

Maps speak for themselves

The Tibetan Empire extended to the Chinese capital Chang'an (modern Xian) in the East, to Turfan in the North, to the Pamirs and Samarkhand in the West and the Gangetic plain in the South.

King Songtsen Gampo, the 33rd King (605-649)

King Trisong Detsen, the 37th King (755-797)

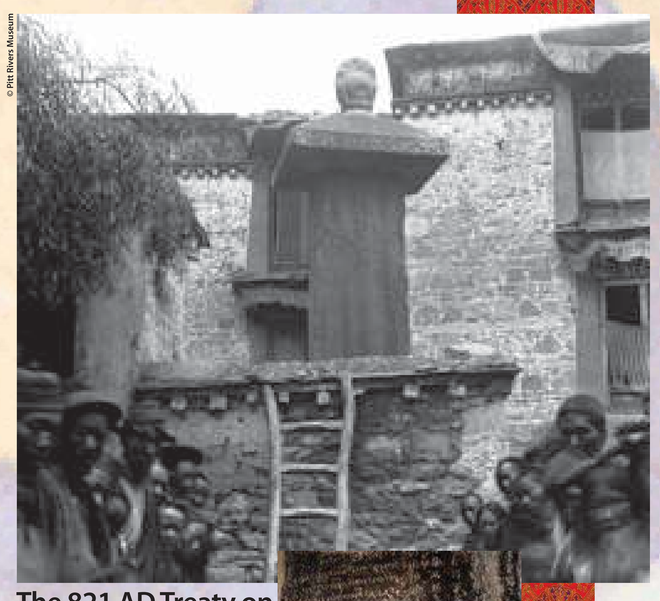
King Ralpacan, the 41st King (806-838)

Songtsen Gampo built the greatest Empire of his time in Asia. During his reign, the capital was moved from Yarlung to Lhasa. A fort was built where the Potala Palace stands today. The King was the first to understand the necessity of a balanced policy between Tibet's neighbours: it is probably why he married several royal princesses.

Under subsequent kings, especially Trisong Detsen, the Second Religious King, the Tibetan Empire continued to expand. In 783 AD, a treaty was concluded which established the borders between Tibet and China.

In 821 AD, during the reign of Ralpachen, the Third Religious King, a peace agreement was signed between Tibet and China. The terms of the Treaty were engraved on three stone pillars: one demarcates the border between China and Tibet, the second is in the Jokhang Cathedral in Lhasa and the third in Chang'an in China.

Armor and costumes of the Religious Kings' period



The 821 AD Treaty on the Jokhang Pillar

The 821 AD Treaty reads: *"Tibet and China shall abide by the frontiers of which they are now in occupation. All to the east is the country of Great China; and all to the west is, without question, the country of Great Tibet... Between the two countries no smoke nor dust shall be seen. There shall be no sudden alarms and the very word 'enemy' shall not be spoken. …This solemn agreement has established a great epoch when Tibetans shall be happy in the land of Tibet, and Chinese in the land of China."*

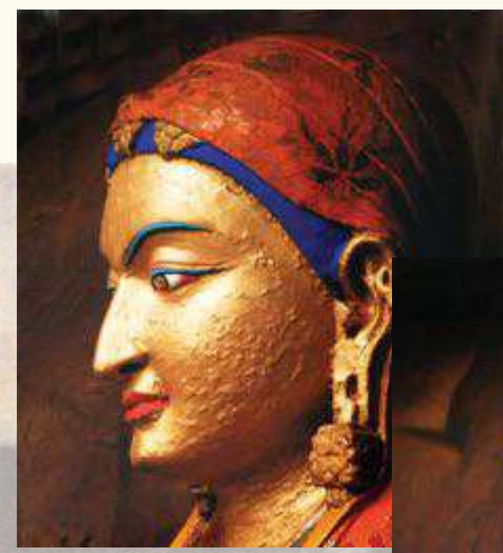
The 783 AD Treaty between Tibet and China on a pillar at the foot of the Potala

Details of the Shol Potala Pillar

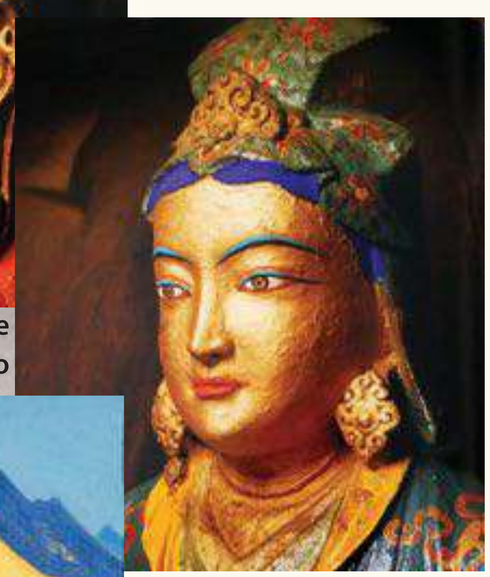
The Light comes from India

Buddhism takes root in Tibet

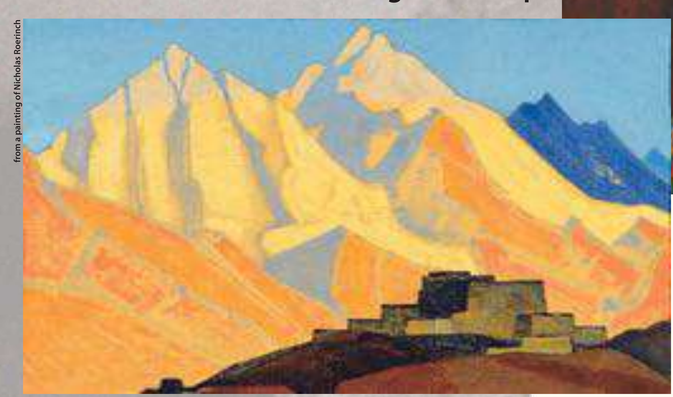
Statue of Buddha brought by Wen Cheng, in Jokhang Cathedral in Lhasa



Bhrikuti, the Nepalese wife of Songtsen Gampo



Wen Cheng, the Chinese wife of Songtsen Gampo



from a painting of Nicholas Roerrich

The Buddha Dharma began shining over Tibet

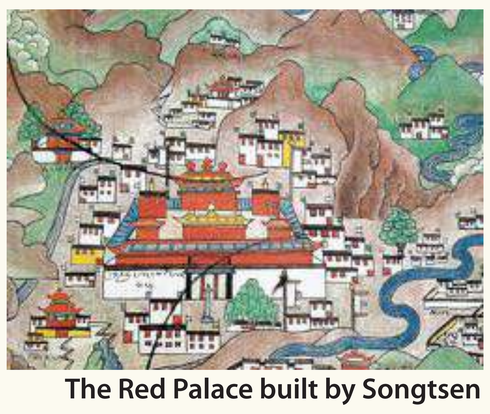
After marrying a Nepalese and a Chinese Princess, King Songtsen Gampo converted to Buddhism. These two marriages played a crucial role in the spread of the new faith in Tibet.

More than hundred years later, King Trisong Detsen invited Shantarakshita, the Abbot of Nalanda to teach the Buddha Dharma and ordain the first monks. Shantarakshita immediately faced serious difficulties due to the strong opposition from the indigenous Bon. He convinced the king that the only way out was to invite the Tantric Master, Guru Padmasambhava; he alone could subdue the forces adverse to Buddhism.

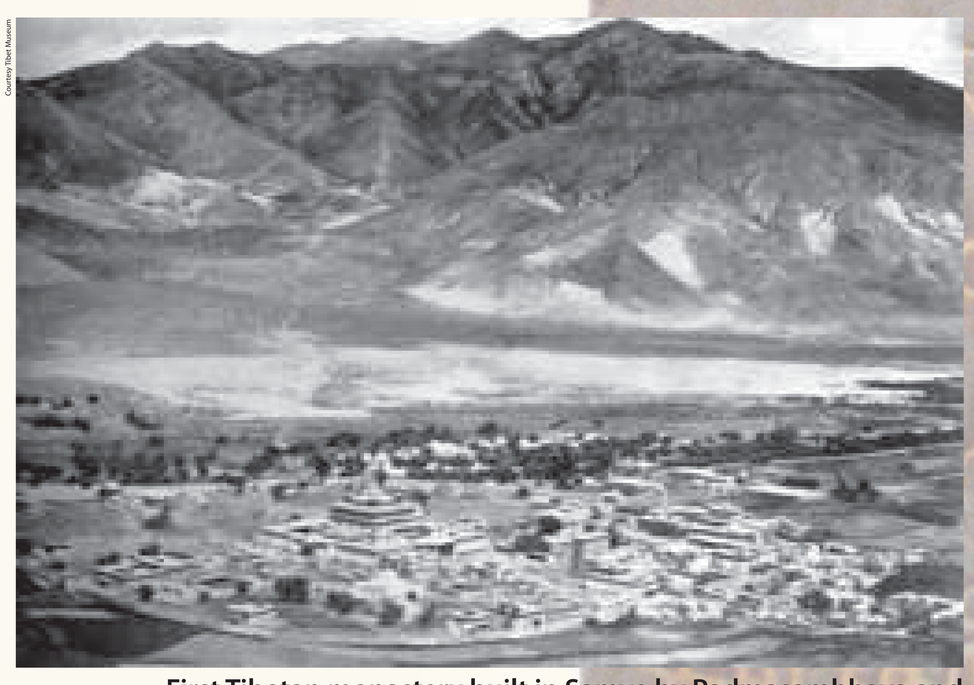
Shantarakshita predicted that a dispute would arise between the two schools of Buddhism, the Indian and the Chinese. The issue was sorted out through the famous Samye Debate. After 2 years of intense discussion, the Indian path prevailed and a proclamation was issued stating that the Indian path was thereafter the orthodox faith.

Pillar erected by Trisong Detsen in Samye. Buddhism became the State religion

Buddhist precepts were progressively incorporated into the laws of the Land of Snows. It was the first steps towards the transformation of the warlike Tibetans into people turned towards inner research.



The Red Palace built by Songtsen Gampo where the Potala stands today



Courtesy Tibet Museum

First Tibetan monastery built in Samye by Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita in 779 AD. A debate was held between 792 and 794 to decide which school of Buddhism the Land of Snows would follow

Nalanda Abbot Shantarakshita

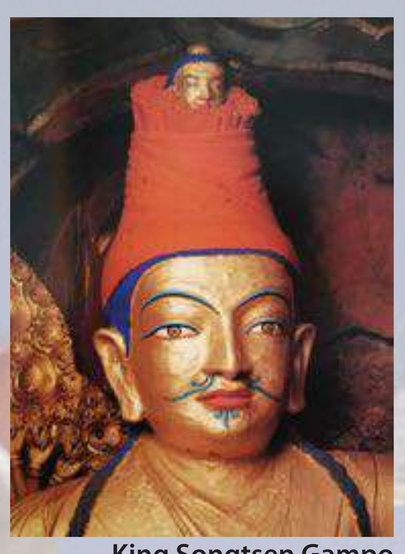
Padmasambhava the great Guru from Swat

A Script from India

The Translation Can Start

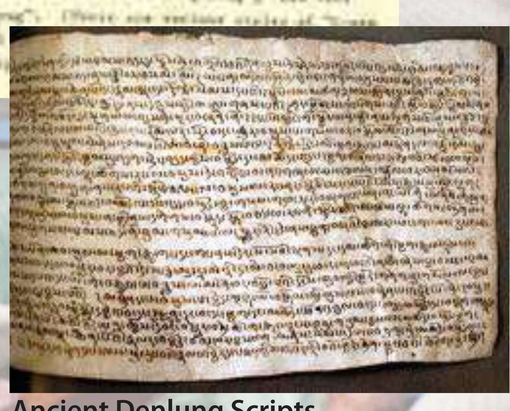
© Library of Tibetan Works & Archives

Thomi Sambhota



King Songtsen Gampo

Different types of Tibetan scripts



Ancient Denlung Scripts

Ancient Sanskrit manuscript found in Tibet

One of the greatest merits of King Songsen Gampo was to have sent his Minister Thomi Sambhota with sixteen students to India to study Buddhism, Sanskrit and the Art of writing. On his return to Tibet, a Tibetan script, deriving from the Gupta alphabet was created. This script is still in use today. The translation of the first Buddhist scriptures could start.

Some Bon scholars believed that a Zhangzhung script predated the present Tibetan script. But no archeological evidence (on pillar, rock, etc) has been found so far.

Old manuscripts in library in Tibet

Tibetan scripts on a Dunhuang manuscript

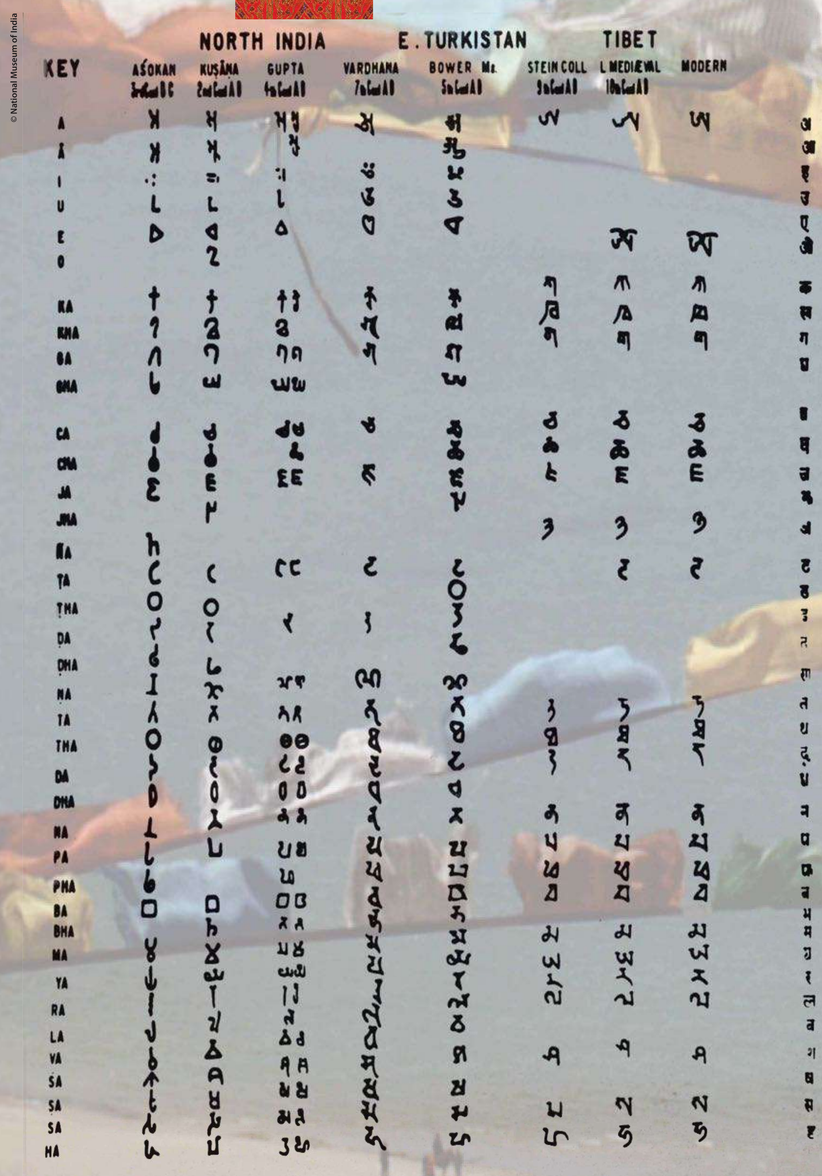


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Chart prepared by the National Museum, New Delhi

Background photo: Herbert Grammatikopoulos

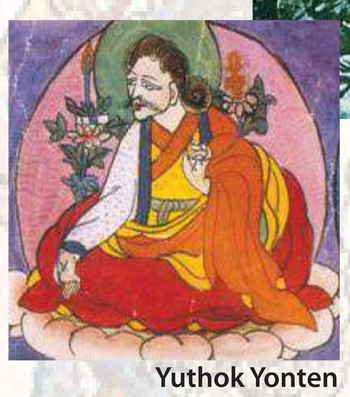
Sowa Rigpa

The Tibetan Art of Healing

The Buddha of Medicine

Sanskrit medical Text

Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Elder



Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Younger

Tibetan medical texts

The Tibetan system of Medicine, known as *Sowa Rigpa* or Art of Healing is a fascinating example of the influence of neighbouring countries on the culture of Tibet.

During the reign of King Trisong Detsen, physicians and medical experts from India, China, Central Asia, Persia and even Greece gathered in Samye for a Medical Council to compare their respective knowledge. Thereafter, the great physician Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Elder prepared the first compilation the *Gyud Shi* or the Four Tantras, based on the prevalent indigenous Tibetan knowledge. However several features from other systems, particularly from the *Ayurveda* were incorporated. An original and well adapted Tibetan Art of Healing was born.

Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Younger, who visited India 6 times during the 12th century, edited the work of Yuthok the Elder to its present form. The 156 chapters of the *Gyud Shi* are still the essence of Tibetan medical knowledge and continue to be studied, not only in Tibet, but also in the entire Himalayan belt and Mongolia.

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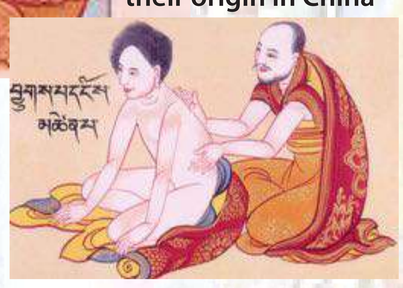
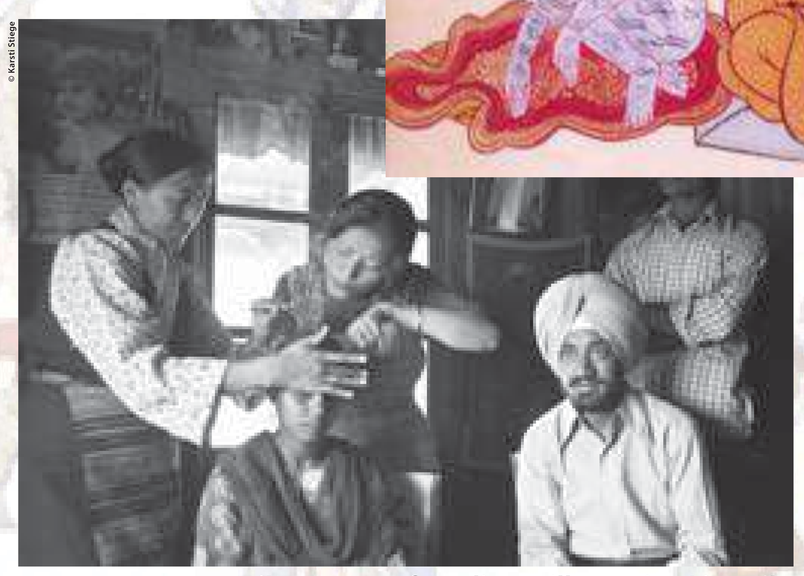
Rituals, astrology and divination play an important role in the Art of Healing. Some features originate in the Bon tradition

Moxas probably have their origin in China



A complete system



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Tibetan Art of Healing still practiced in exile

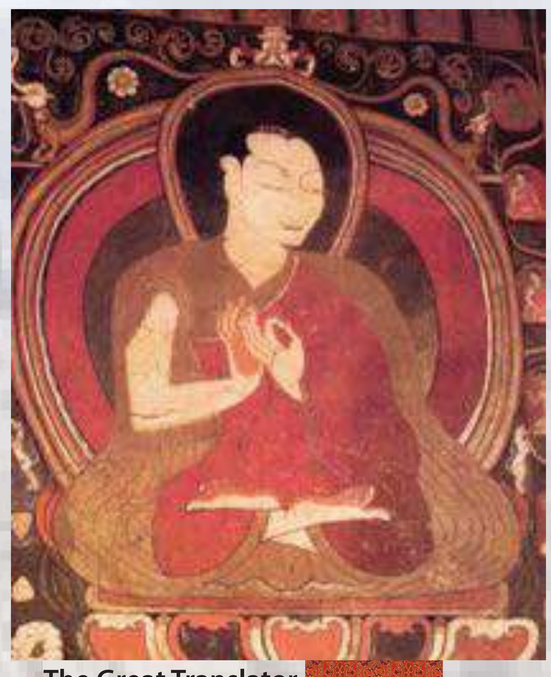
Tibetan surgical instruments

Dr. Dawa

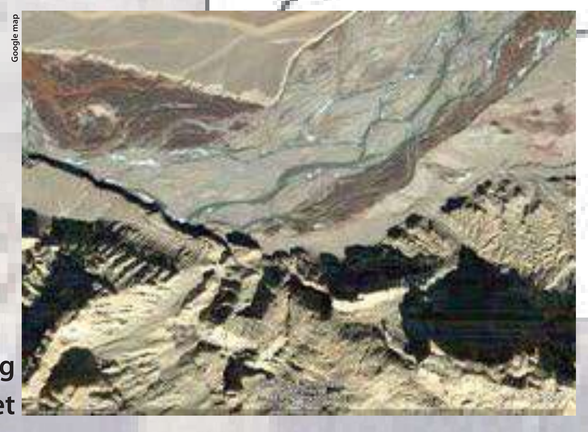
Tibetan medicinal plant

Cultural and Religious Renaissance

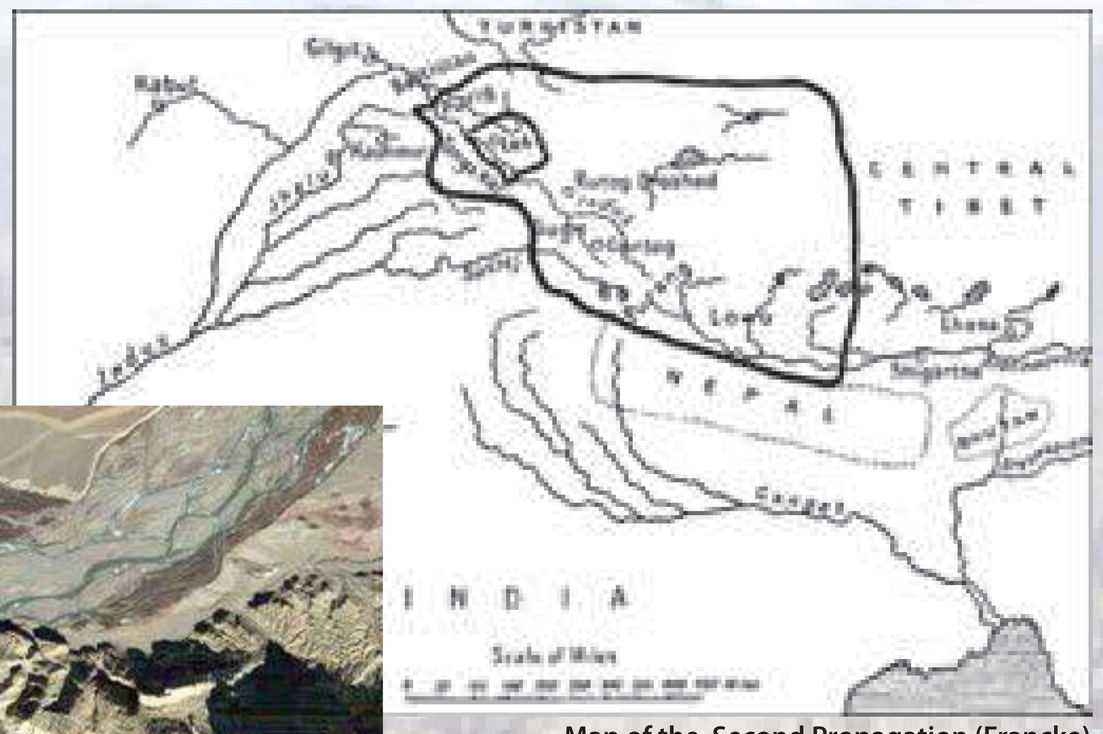
The Second Propagation



The Great Translator
Rinchen Zangpo



Map of Tholing
in Western Tibet



Map of the Second Propagation (Francke)

After Lang Darma killed his brother King Ralpachen in 838 AD, Buddhism was eradicated from Tibet. For more than one and a half centuries, the State lost its political homogeneity; it became fragmented into principalities which continuously fought among themselves. But an empire is truly great when the spirit which built it can survive destruction and reappear under a new and more complete form. It is what happened in the Land of Snows. At the end of the 10th century, the old king of Ngari, Lhalama Yeshe Od was instrumental in the revival of Buddhism in Tibet. Young Tibetans were sent to meet saints, yogis and scholars in the great Indian *Viharas*. They brought back original Buddhist scriptures which were translated into Tibetan. The most famous amongst them was Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo.

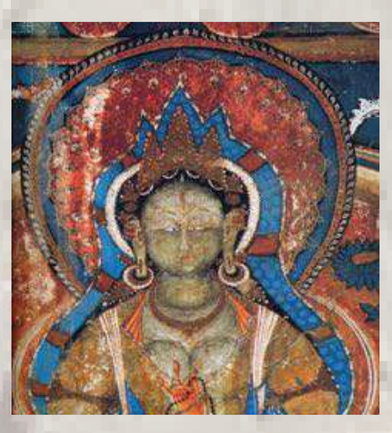
The Bengali master
Atisha Dipankara

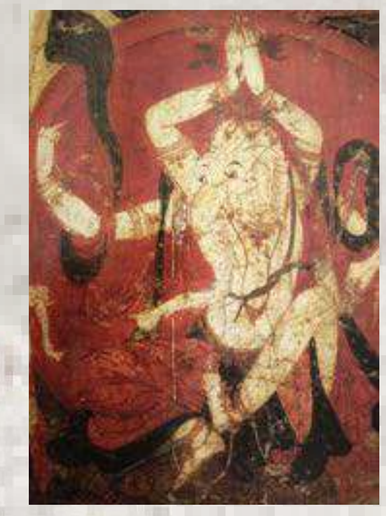
The great poet and
yogi Milarepa

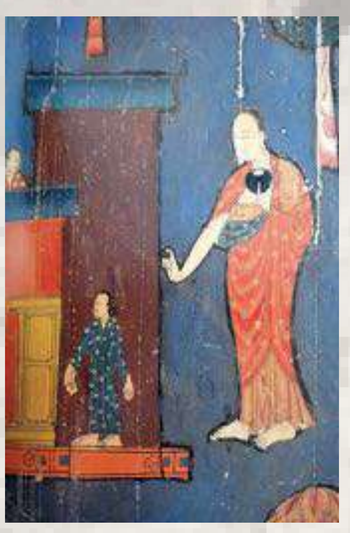
The ruins of Tsaparang
monastery in Western Tibet

The spiritual renaissance originated from the Himalayan regions of Spiti, Kinnaur and Ladakh in India and Ngari and Guge in Tibet: these areas had been spared the Muslim invasions. Many renowned teachers participated in this movement; amongst others, the Indian monk Atisha Dipankara; the Tibetan layman Marpa and his disciple Milarepa. Their lives exemplify the continuous crisscrossing of men and ideas across the Himalayas and how the Buddha Dharma was preserved in its integrity.

Art in Western Tibet and Ladakh
was markedly influenced by India and
Nepal during the 11th/12th century

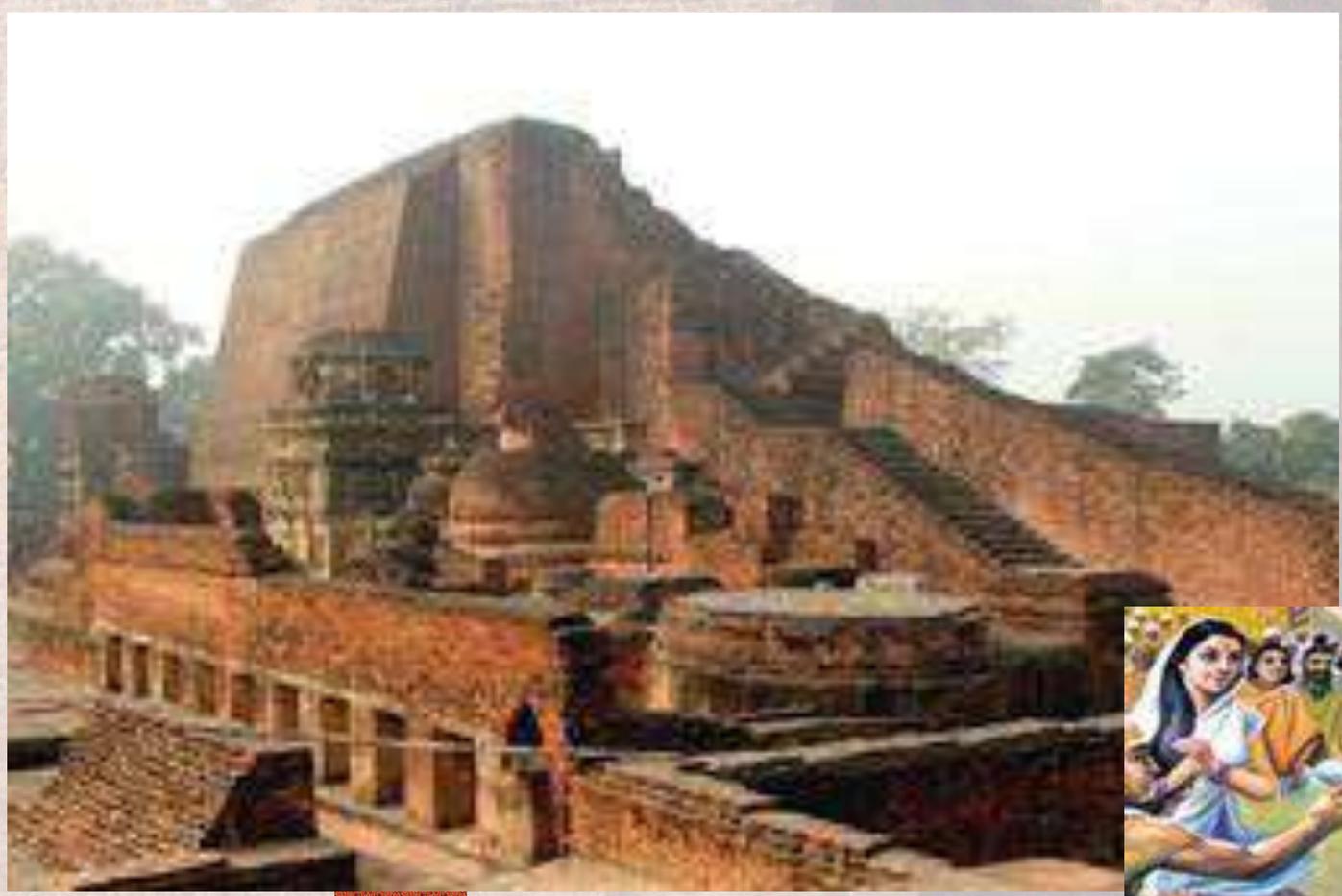




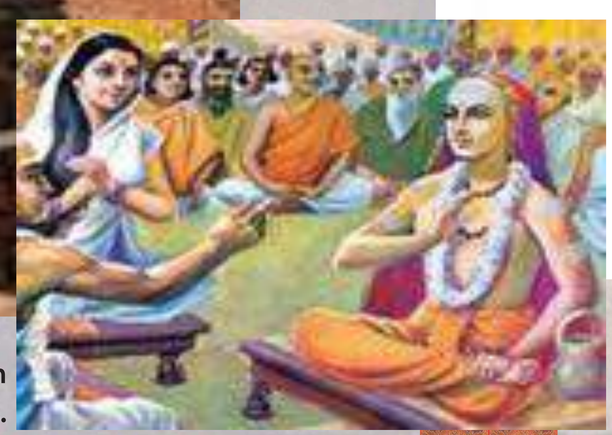


The Source is Dry

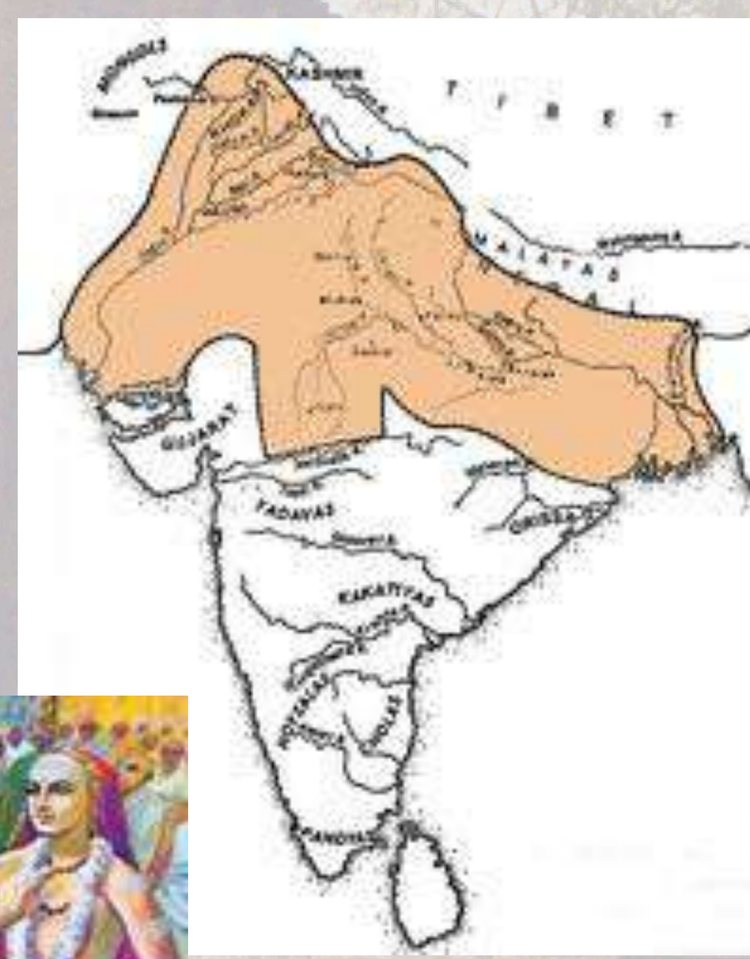
The Decline of Buddhism in India



Ruins of Nalanda Vihara



Adi Shankara incorporated several Buddhist tenets into Hinduism while converting many Buddhists.



Map of Muslim expansion on the sub-continent (1236)

Mohammed Ghori and his descendants destroyed Nalanda

The decline of the Buddhist faith in the Indian subcontinent had incalculable consequences for the Roof of the World. Four factors are usually mentioned to explain this decline: the revival of Hinduism mainly after the conversions undertaken by Adi Shankaracharya; the degeneration of Buddhism; the loss of princely patronage in Northern India. The *coup de grâce* came with the arrival of the Turkish armies who slaughtered monks and destroyed the *viharas*.

With the decline of the Pala Dynasty, royal patronage shifted from Buddhism to Hinduism.

The monasteries of Tibet became the last repositories of the ancient wisdom which virtually disappeared in its land of origin.

A Tibetan monk, Dharmasvamin who visited Nalanda in 1235 witnessed only destruction. He could not recover a single manuscript from what was once, one of the richest libraries of the world. He could however meet a 90 year old monk who taught him Sanskrit. When he was warned that the Muslim troops were approaching, he carried his master on his shoulders and hid until the raiders had gone. This image symbolized the end of India's cultural influence over Tibet.

Some of the Indian artists who migrated to Western Tibet may have painted these exquisite frescoes.

Dharmasvamin (Chag Lotsawa) may have carried his guru between these buildings

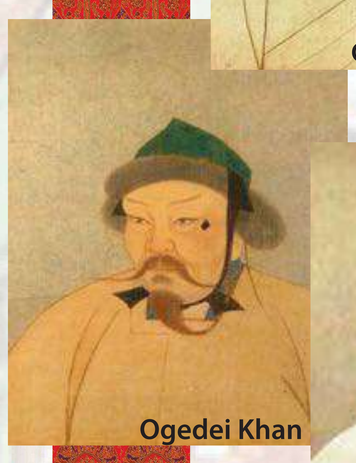
Priest-Patron Relation

A Special Partnership with the Mongols

Map of the Mongol Empire at the beginning of the 13th century

The Sakya monastery became the main political center in Tibet

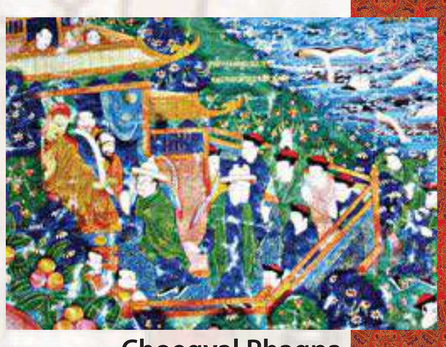
Genghis Khan



Ogedei Khan

Kublai Khan

Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyalsten



Choegyal Phagpa teaching at the Mongol Court

The history of Tibet took another turn with the rise of the Mongol Empire. At the end of the 12th century, the hordes of Genghis Khan overran Europe and Asia. A solution had to be found to defend the integrity of the Tibetan nation from the Mongols for whom the Buddhist concept of love and non-violence was still unknown.

'Good luck' came in 1244, when Godan Khan invited a leading Tibetan Lama, Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen to the Mongolian Court to be the Imperial Preceptor. The relation between the Khans and the Lamas of Sakya continued to flourish under Kublai Khan who adopted Buddhism as the State religion after Dogon Choegyal Phagpa, Sakya Pandita's nephew had become the Khan's teacher. In gratitude, Kublai Khan offered him political authority over Tibet in 1254.

The Priest-Patron relationship (or *Choe-yon*) developed thus: in exchange for their spiritual advice, the Lamas of Sakya were given temporal authority over Tibet, while getting protection against outside interference. This unique Central Asian institution would later become the corner stone of the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Manchu Emperors.

The *Choe-yon* relationship solved the problem faced by the Buddhist State, which could not have survived without the external patronage of a strong military power.

Mongols were great hunters and warriors

The Mongol Khan bids farewell to Choegyal Phagpa as he leaves for Tibet

Mongols are blessed by the Lama on the way

First encounter between Kublai Khan and Choegyal Phagpa at the Mongol Court

Titles, Decrees and Dharma

A Genuine Autonomy?

Changchup Gyaltsen, founder of the Phagmodru dynasty

As the power of the Yuan Dynasty declined, the princes of Phagmodru challenged the power of the Sakya hierarchs. In 1358, Changchub Gyaltsen marched to Sakya and emerged as Tibet's new ruler.

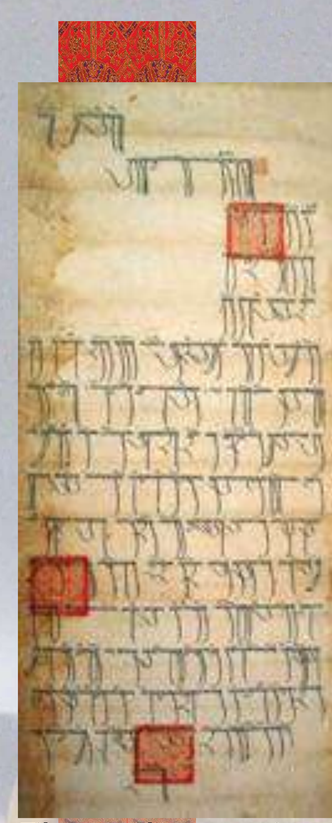
For many Tibetans, this was a golden age; for the first time since the Religious Kings, no foreign 'protection' was required. A *code of law,* similar to the one adopted by the early kings was enforced and the Mongol administrative system was replaced by a purely Tibetan one. In 1368 in China, the Yuan Dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the Mings.

The Phagmodru princes ruled Tibet for nearly a century, before being replaced by another dynasty, the Rinpung in 1481. From 1565, until the advent of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642, the princes of Tsang ruled Tibet.

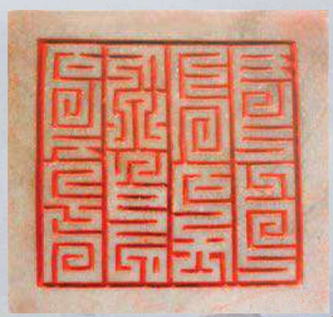
Courtesy ICT

Map showing Tibet as an independent entity

Seal in Phagpa scripts given by a Yuan Emperor



Tibetan rulers sometimes used decrees issued by the Chinese Emperors

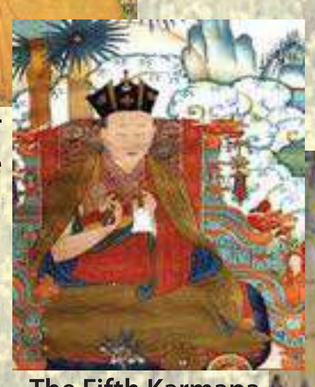


Type of seals presented by the Chinese emperors

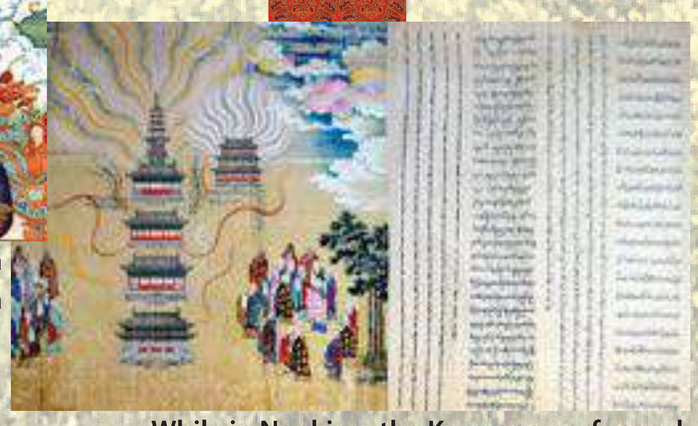
The Chinese assert that Tibet has been a part of China since the Yuan Dynasty. Their 'evidence' is based on titles bestowed by the Yuans, Mings and Manchus on Tibetan Lamas. The process began with the Mongol Khans; it flourished during the Ming Dynasty and continued during the Qing Dynasty. There is no logic behind this 'evidence'.

Title conferred by Emperor Yongle to a Tibetan Lama

Emperor Yongle

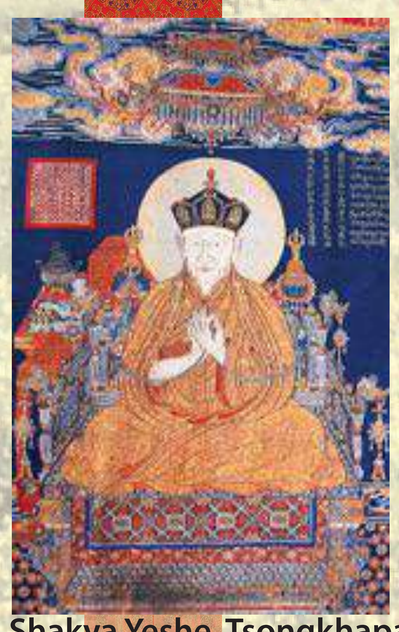


The Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa



While in Nanking, the Karmapa performed some special rituals for the Emperor Yongle

Letter sent to a Sakya hierarch by the 'Imperial Tutor'



Shakya Yeshe, Tsongkhapa's disciple was conferred titles and given a black hat by Emperors Yongle and Xuande

Background photo: Herbert Grammatikopoulos

The Rise of the Yellow Order

The First Dalai Lamas

Drontonpa, one of the founders of the Kadampa School

Lama Tsongkhapa (1357-1419)

Gedun Drupa (1391-1474) the 1st Dalai Lama

Lama Tsongkhapa founded the Gelug order. Born in Amdo province in 1357, he travelled extensively and studied under different masters. Integrating the lineages of the Kadampas with other traditions, his teachings became known as the New Kadampa school or Gelug. While he founded the Ganden monastery, his disciple Gedun Drupa, known retrospectively as the First Dalai Lama, built the Drepung and Tashilhunpo monasteries.

The Tashilhunpo monastery seat of the Panchen Lamas

Gedun Gyatso (1475-1542) the 2nd Dalai Lama

Gedun Gyatso was proclaimed the reincarnation of Gedun Drupa. A renowned scholar, he traveled widely to extend the Gelugpa influence. In 1512, he became abbot of the Tashilhunpo and a few years later of Drepung. Like Gedun Drupa, he wielded no political power.

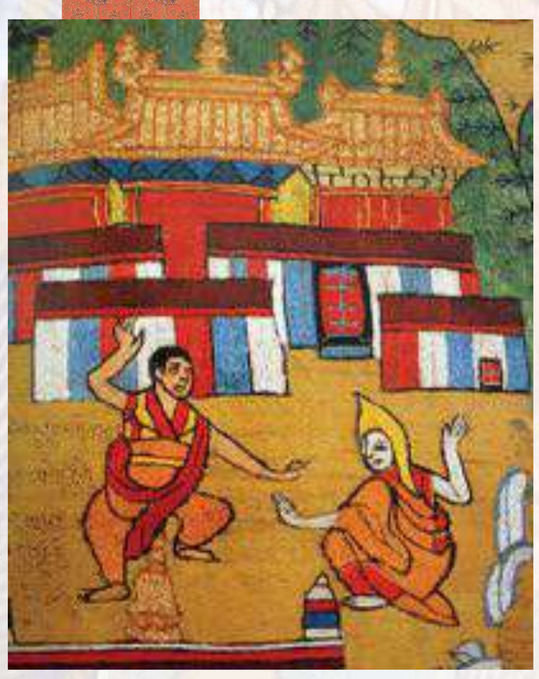
The Mongol chieftain Altan Khan

Sonam Gyatso was the first to bear the title of 'Dalai Lama'. Visiting the Lake Kokonor area, he met Altan Khan, the Mongol chieftain in 1578. The Khan bestowed on Sonam Gyatso the title 'Ocean of Wisdom' or 'Dalai'. The Dalai Lama died later preaching in Mongolia.

Sonam Gyatso (1543-1588), the 3rd Dalai Lama

The birth of Yonten Gyatso in Mongolia as the grandson of Altan Khan, helped to firm up the connection between Mongolia and Tibet. On his return to Tibet, he became a disciple of the Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen who ordained him. However, till his death in 1617, the Drukpa School was still prominent in Tibet.

Yonten Gyatso (1589-1617) the 4th Dalai Lama



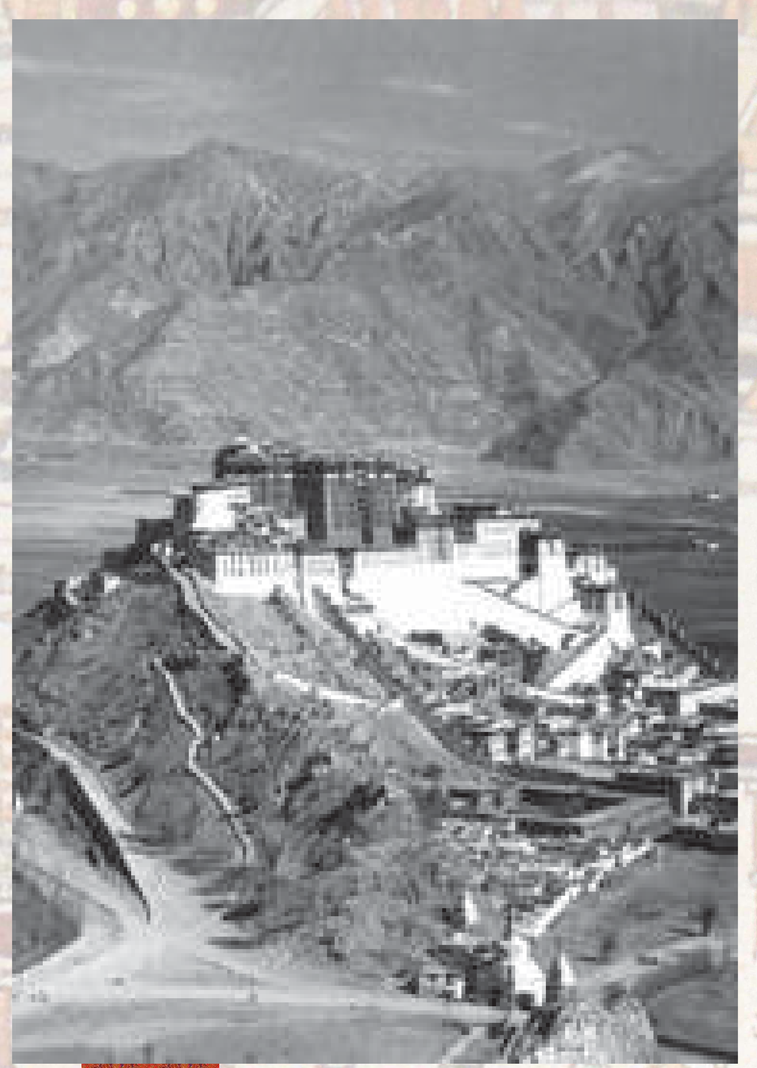
Debate in a Gelug monastery

The Great Fifth Dalai Lama

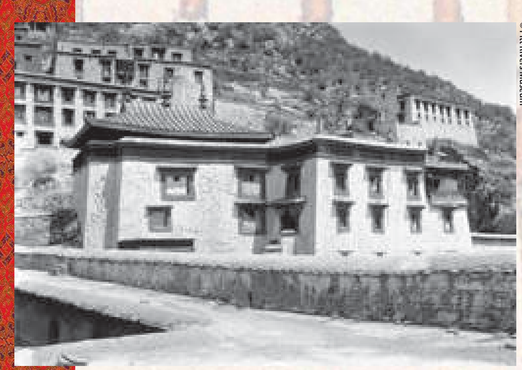
A Harmonious Blend

Bronze of the Fifth Dalai Lama

Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso was born in 1617, at a time when Tibet was going through a period of turmoil. However, after the Qoshot chieftain, Gushri Khan took control over Tibet, the spiritual and political power was handed over to the young Lama. In 1642, he became the Fifth Dalai Lama.



The Potala Palace in Lhasa



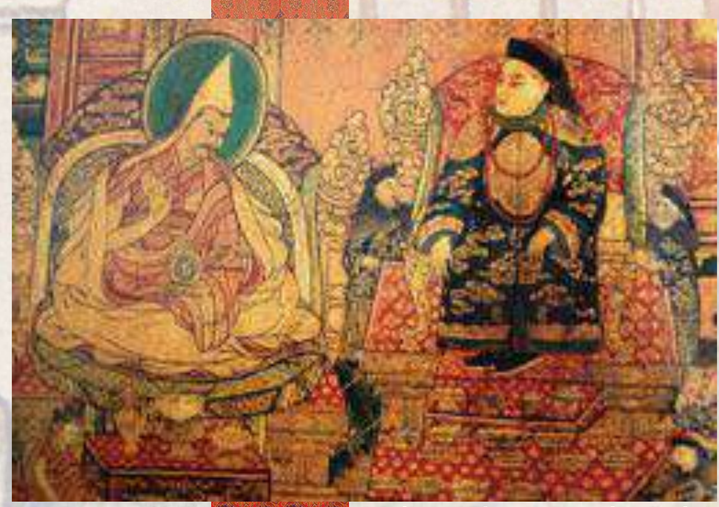
© Pitt Rivers Museum

Former residence of the Dalai Lamas in Ganden monastery

He ordered the construction of the Potala Palace on the Red Hill, where King Songtsen Gampo had built a fort. Though the Potala would only be completed after his death, the Dalai Lama used it as his residence. Lhasa became the capital of Tibet.

Collection Jean Lasalle

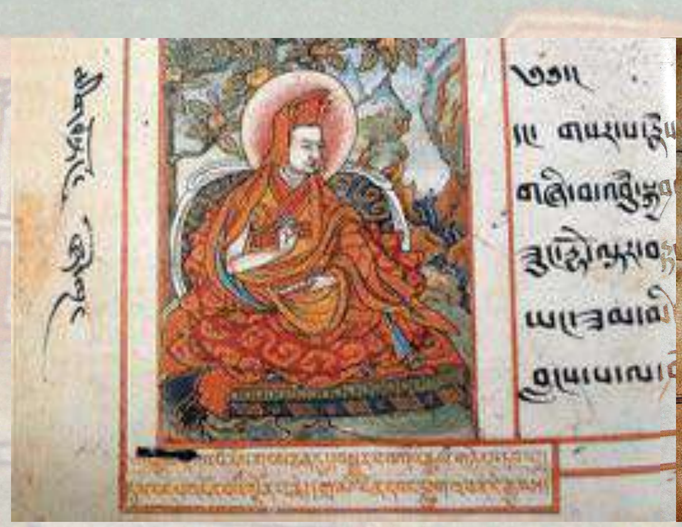
The Dalai Lama, Gushri Khan and Sangye Gyatso



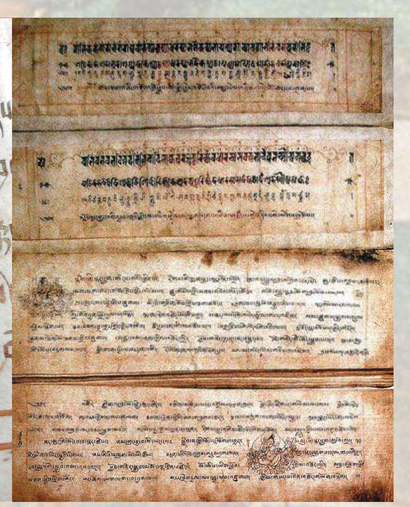
Audience between the Dalai Lama and Emperor Shunzhi

In 1652, he went to Beijing to meet the Manchu Emperor Shunzhi. While in the Chinese capital, the Dalai Lama stayed at the Yellow Palace, specially built for him by the emperor. They are said to have met as equals.

The Fifth Dalai Lama, a great scholar versed in Sanskrit, established the Ganden Phodrang, a form of governance characterized by an 'harmonious blend between the secular and the spiritual'. For the first time since the Religious Kings, Tibet had a centralized form of government. He died in 1682 before the construction of the Potala was completed. His Regent Sangye Gyatso, kept his death secret until its completion.



Desi Sangye Gyatso also founded the Chakpori School of Medicine



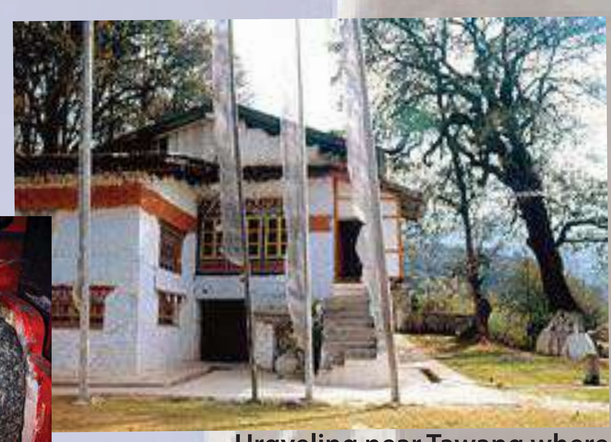
Medical text written by Desi Sangye Gyatso

Illustration of the Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama

The Sixth Dalai Lama

On the White Wings

Tawang monastery
in Arunachal Pradesh



Urgyeling near Tawang where
the Dalai Lama was educated

Footprint of the
Dalai Lama

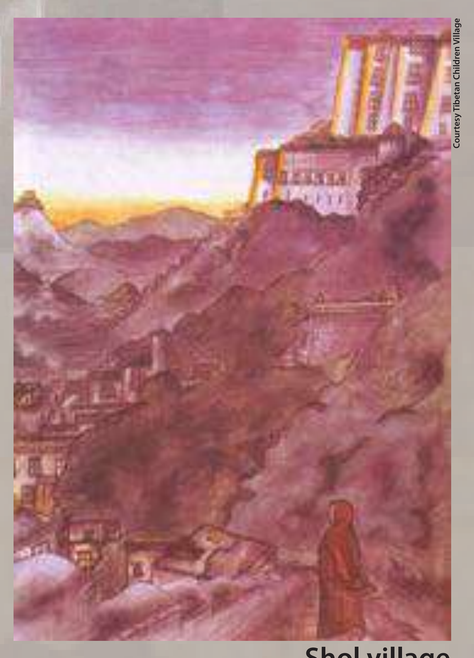
Tsangyang Gyatso
the 6th Dalai Lama

Tsangyang Gyatso was born in 1683 in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. He was already an adolescent when he was taken to Lhasa to be enthroned by his guru, the Panchen Lama Lobsang Yeshe, as the 6th Dalai Lama.

Still remembered for his exquisite poetry which has been sung for generations around a fire with a few cups of Tibetan beer , he is also considered a great tantric master who could appear at different places at the same time.

He consistently refused to take monk vows and preferred the pleasures of life, visiting at night the taverns in Shol below the Potala Palace and writing poems. He loved freedom and was suffocating in the dark rooms of the Potala. He felt oppressed in the midst of power struggles between Tibetan aristocrats, Mongol chieftains and the Chinese Emperor.

He is said to have died in 1706 after being kidnapped by the Qosot Mongols.



Courtesy Tibetan Children Village

Shol village
below the Potala

© Pitt Rivers Museum

Lukhang Pavilion where
he often spent time

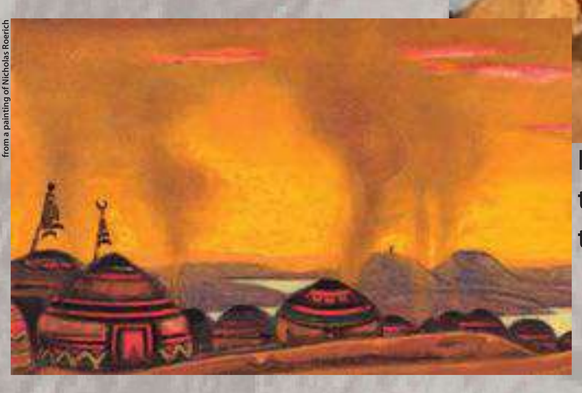
In my Palace, the place of Heaven on Earth
They call me Rigzin Tsangyang Gyaltso
But below, in the village of Shol
They call me Dangzang Wangpo,
The profligate, for my lovers are many.

His *Secret Biography* says that on his way to China, he escaped the Mongols and secretly left for Inner Mongolia as a wandering monk. Later he settled in Alashan in Inner Mongolia where he passed away in 1746. He is said to have built several monasteries and had thousands of disciples.

His last poem announced his return in Eastern Tibet as the Seventh Dalai Lama:

Oh White Crane!
Lend me your wings
I shall not fly far
From Lithang, I shall return

He probably visited
these monasteries, saw
these dunes in Alashan



from a painting of Nicholas Roerich

Troubled Times

Two Difficult Centuries

Lhazang Khan

The 7th Dalai Lama receiving Mongol and Chinese guests

French map of 1778 showing the 'Kingdom of the Dalai Lama'

The 18th and 19th century witnessed one of the most troubled times in Tibet's history. After the Qosot Mongol chief, Lhazang Khan kidnapped the young Sixth Dalai Lama, he became extremely unpopular. The invasion of the Dzungar in 1717 however saw the end of Lhazang Khan's reign over Tibet. Three years later, the young 7th Dalai Lama entered Lhasa. He was accompanied by Manchu troops; this did not stop the internal strife.

In the following years, Miwang Pholanay played a constructive role in reducing the sectarian struggle and reorganising the Tibetan administration.

© Pitt Rivers Museum
Amban's residence in Lhasa

In 1793, a 29-Point 'Regulations for Governance' of Tibet was promulgated by Emperor Qianlong. It is today cited by Beijing as proof of the Manchus' control over Tibet. One of the major contentious issues was the role of the Ambans.

Rev. Huc and Gabet, the two French missionaries who visited Lhasa in 1846 however noted: *"The Government of Tibet resembles that of the Pope and the position occupied by the Chinese Ambassadors was the same as that of the Austrian Ambassador at Rome."*

Emperor Qianlong portrayed as a Tibetan Lama

The Chinese 29-Point Regulation

The twenty crucial years between the death of a Dalai Lama and his successor assuming power exemplify the fragility of the Tibetan system of governance. It was murmured that the Chinese exploited this weakness as many Dalai Lamas died in their adolescence. The 19th century saw five Dalai Lamas.

Illustration of the Chinese 'recognition' of the 9th Dalai Lama

Chinese Amban and party

A Policy of Isolation

The Forbidden Land

Tibetan Army guarding the border

Explorers faced unbelievable difficulties to discover unexplored areas.

"No other land has captured man's imagination quite like Tibet. Hidden away behind the protecting Himalayas in the heart of Central Asia, ruled over by a God-King and inhabited by a people whose only wheel was the prayer-wheel, it has long been the stuff of traveler's dreams."

Peter Hopkirk

Border guards

from a painting of Nicholas Roerich

Explorers dreamt of discovering a Shangrila

French explorer Alexandra David-Neel, the first foreign woman to reach Lhasa in 1924

During the 19th and the first part of 20th century, Tibet witnessed the greatest thriller in the history of Asia: the Great Game.

Great empires fought an undeclared war on the tracts of Central Asia to bring under their suzerainty large expanses of unexplored territories. The Game was simple, send some adventurers or small armies to these remote regions, annex them, force some treaties on them and assure the natives of your protection while trading local goods against 'modern' commodities. An essential part of the game was to take along cartographers and missionaries who helped establishing control over these 'uncivilized' regions.

French explorer Dutreuil de Rhins attacked by bandits in Eastern Tibet

These intrepid travelers were not just explorers, professional soldiers, diplomats or mountaineers, some had an intelligence mission to accomplish, primarily to bring back maps and information on these uncharted places.

Map prepared by Western missionaries (1902)

The Goloks were one of the most ferocious tribes on the marches of Tibet

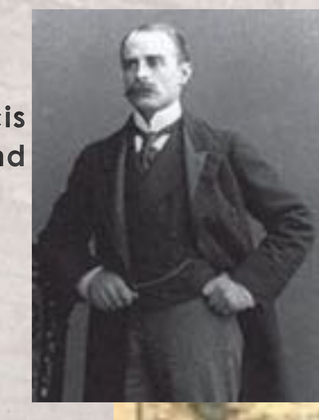
The Younghusband Expedition

The Empire Strikes

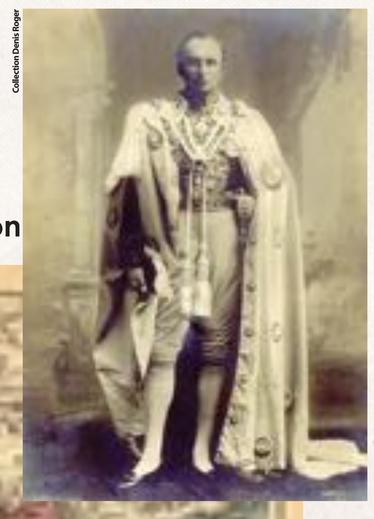
Collection Denis Roger

Collection Denis Roger

Two illustrations of the British campaign in Tibet in 1904. These drawings are often not historically accurate; the intention is to recreate an atmosphere.



Sir Francis Younghusband



Collection Denis Roger

Lord Curzon

Lord Curzon dreamt of expanding the influence of the British Empire to the Roof of the World.

For the first time, a large number of foreigners could inform the world about the mysterious land

British officers negotiating with the 'lamas'

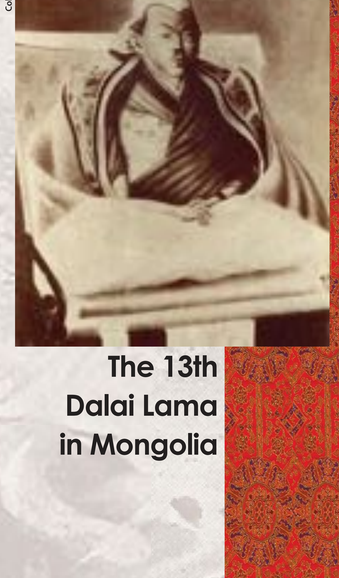
Lord Curzon, India's Viceroy was a man in hurry. He wanted to open new markets in Tibet and check Russian advances in Asia. He had told London that the Chinese suzerainty over Tibet was a 'constitutional fiction' and he was ready to prove it.

In January 1904, Capt. Francis Younghusband led 5,000 Sikh and Gurkha soldiers into the Roof of the world. For a few days, the Tibetan Army tried to stop them, but the battle of Guru soon ended with 700 Tibetans dead. The road to Gyantse and Lhasa was open.

As the Younghusband expedition approached Lhasa, Thupten Gyatso, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama decided to flee to Mongolia. Later, historian Shakabpa wrote: *"It is quite clear that the British were dealing with Tibet as a separate and independent state, particularly since the 1904 convention makes no reference to China or to Chinese authority in Tibet."*

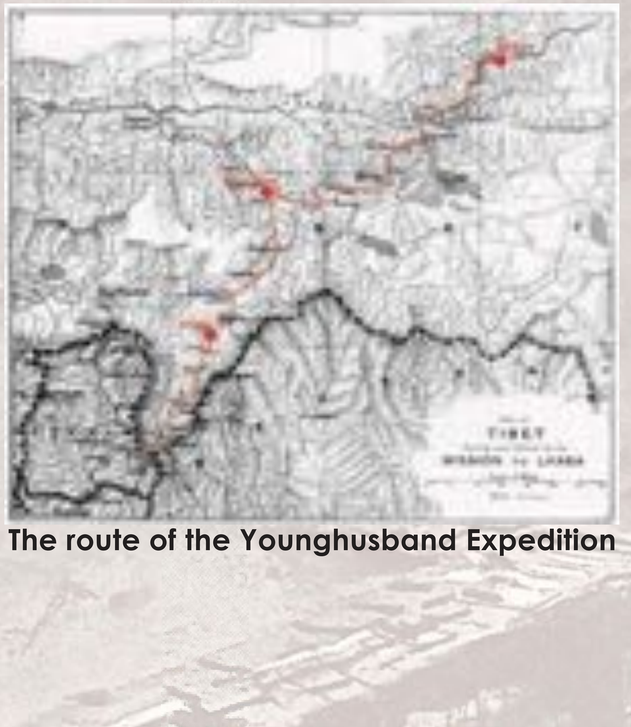
Collection Denis Roger

Jetsumdamba Hutuktu, the ruler of Mongolia



Collection Denis Roger

The 13th Dalai Lama in Mongolia



The route of the Younghusband Expedition

Collection Denis Roger

Illustration showing the British troops entering Lhasa (July 1904)

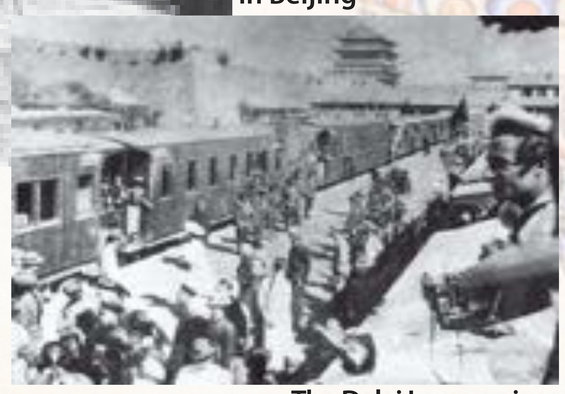
From Exile to Independence

The Trials of a Dalai Lama

Courtesy LTWA

The Dalai Lama in Beijing

Emperor Guangxu



The Dalai Lama arrives in Beijing railway station

In 1908, the Dalai Lama proceeded to China. In Beijing, he had an audience with Emperor Guangxu and the Dowager Empress. When both passed away at the end of the year, the Tibetan ruler performed their funeral rites. A few months later, he decided to return to Tibet.

Shortly after his arrival, the news spread that Chao Erfeng, Governor of Sichuan Province was at the gate of Lhasa. The Dalai Lama had no choice but to flee again; this time, he headed towards India. In February 1910, the Dalai Lama's party crossed the Indian border and took residence in Darjeeling. A month later, the Dalai Lama went to Calcutta to meet Lord Minto, the Viceroy.

Collection Denis Roger

Illustration showing the Dalai Lama in Calcutta

Visit to the Viceroy Lord Minto in Calcutta

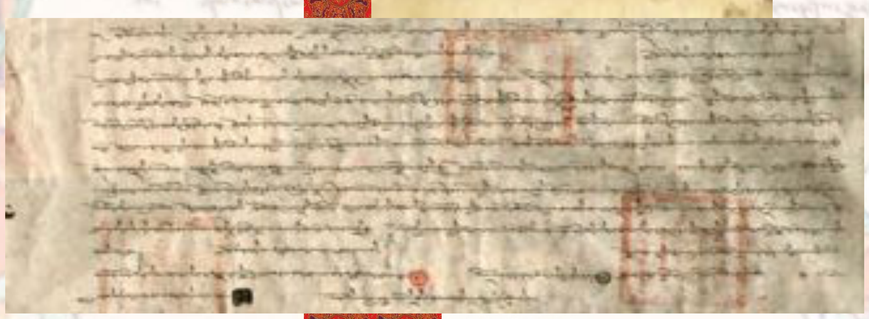
© Pitt Rivers Museum

The Dalai Lama in Kalimpong (1910)

A proclamation of the Dalai Lama

For the Tibetan leader, his unwanted journeys were occasions to get acquainted with the 'world outside' and get a crash course in foreign relations.

He returned to Tibet in 1912 and in January 1913, he issued a public statement declaring his nation independent.



In 1913, the Dalai Lama signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Jetsundamba of Mongolia

After the return of the Dalai Lama, the Chinese troops leave Tibet (1912)

The Tripartite Convention in Simla

The McMahon Line is drawn

The Hill Station of Simla in 1914

Vice-regal Lodge in Simla

Plenipotentiaries of India, Tibet and China in Simla

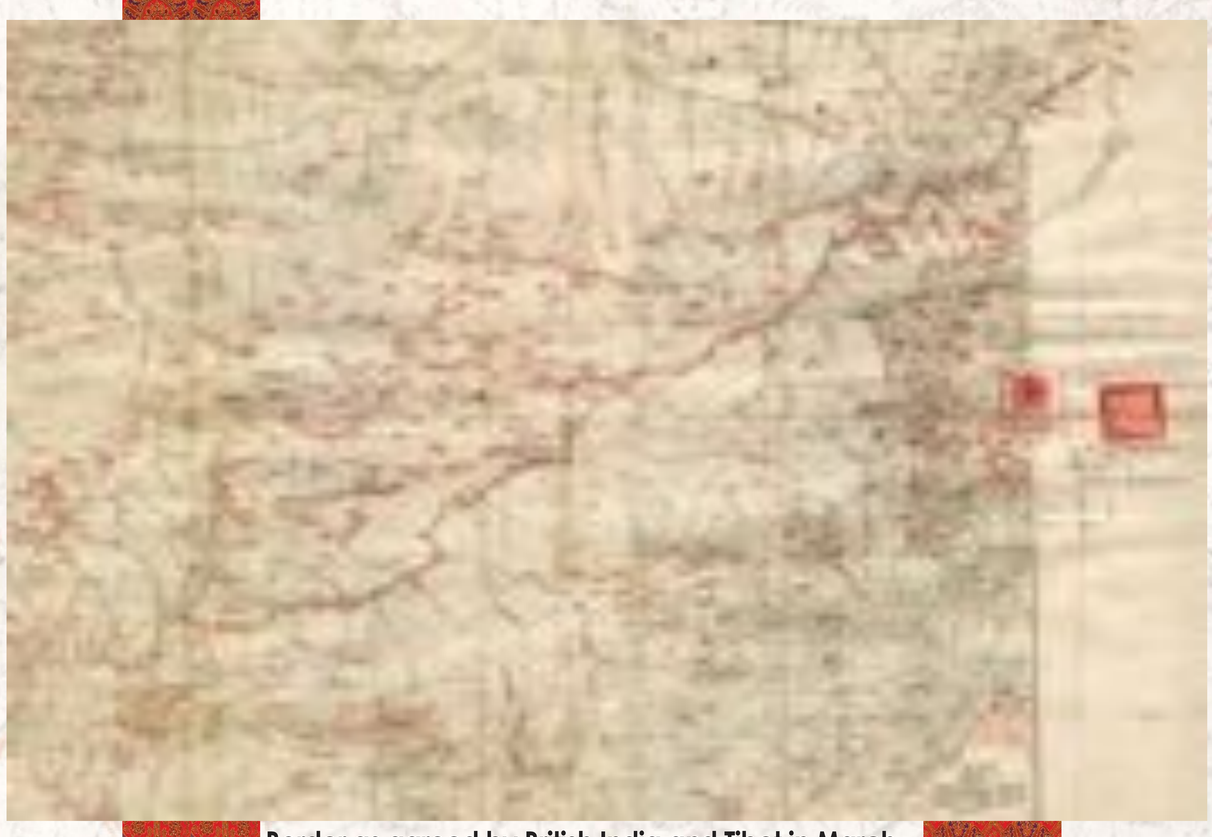
In 1913, the British government convened a tripartite Conference in Simla between plenipotentiaries of Great Britain, China, and Tibet. The Convention provided for an 'Outer Tibet' which would be fully autonomous. However, after initializing the Convention, Ivan Chen, the Chinese plenipotentiary withdrew in July 1914.

Great Britain and Tibet attached a note to the Convention denying China any privileges under the Accord. The Convention was later sealed as a bilateral agreement.

Sir Henry McMahon

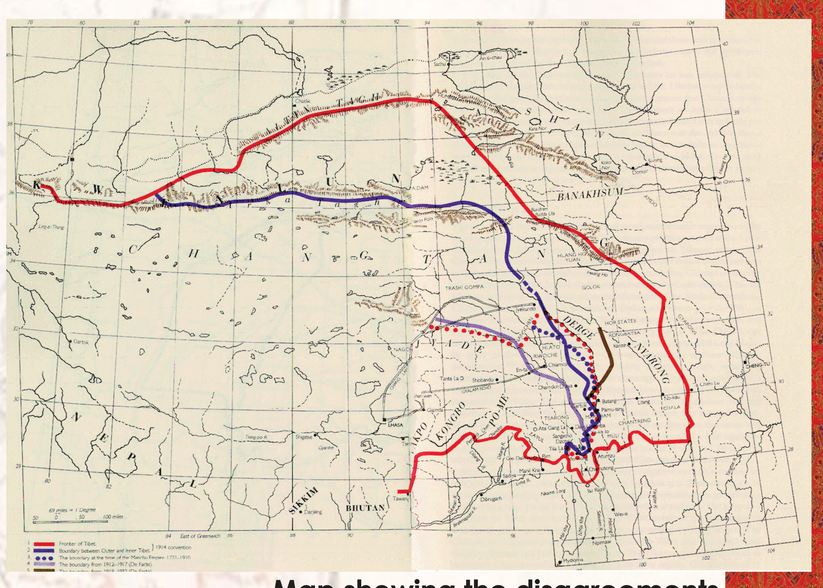
In March 1914, the British and the Tibetans defined their common border in India's North-East. The McMahon Line was born.

During the following years, British officials had regular contacts with the Tibetan Kashag. Trade marts were opened in Tibet and telegraphic lines were maintained by British India's Government.



Border as agreed by British India and Tibet in March 1914. The red line is known as McMahon Line.

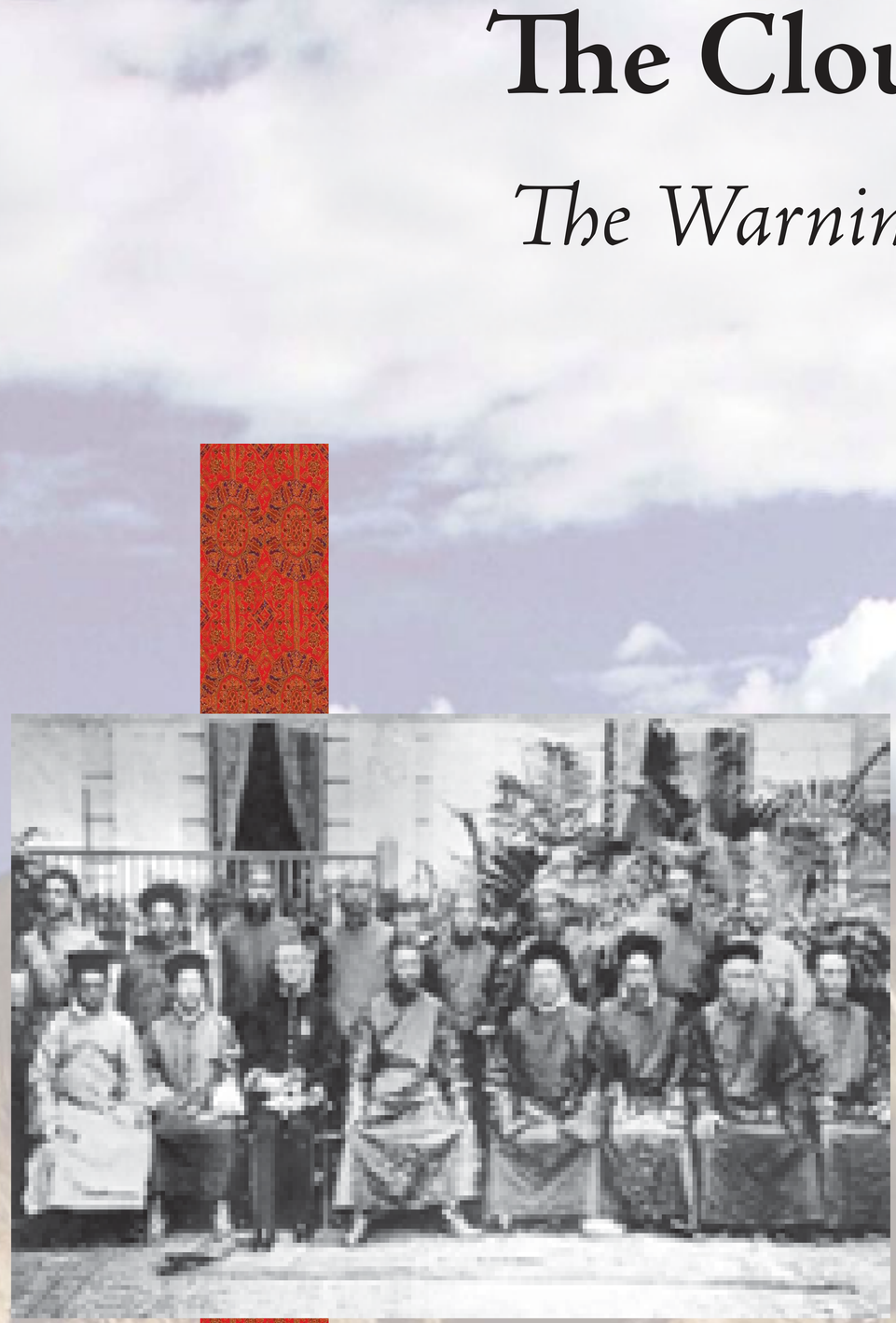
Charles Bell during a visit to Lhasa (1920)



Map showing the disagreements between Tibet and China

The Clouds are Gathering

The Warning of a Progressive Leader

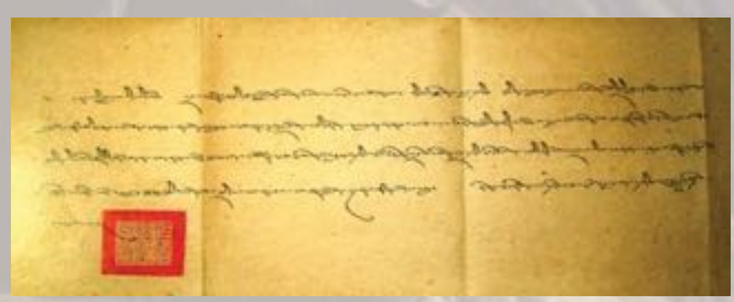


The Dalai Lama, his Cabinet and Sir Charles Bell
His friendship with the British diplomat helped Tibet to come out of its isolation

Sir Charles Bell

© Pitt River Museum

The troops of British India trained the Tibetan Army



A letter from the Dalai Lama congratulating Charles Bell

Thubten Gyatso, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was in many ways a remarkable leader. He sent young Tibetans to England to be educated; he wanted Tibet to join the League of Nations; he started building a modern army; he reformed the monastic discipline. Unfortunately, he had to deal with conservative forces obstructing his reforms and wanting to keep Tibet isolated.

Portrait of the 13th Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama's Last Testament

In his Testament, he prophesized: *"Teachings shall be wiped out completely. Monasteries shall be looted, property confiscated and all living beings shall be destroyed. The property of the officials shall be confiscated; they shall be slaves of the conquerors and shall roam the land in bondage. All souls shall be immersed in suffering and the night shall be long and dark."*

The Dalai Lama understood
the importance of a Tibetan Army

The Dalai Lama introduced
the first car on the Roof of the World

Signs of an Independent Nation

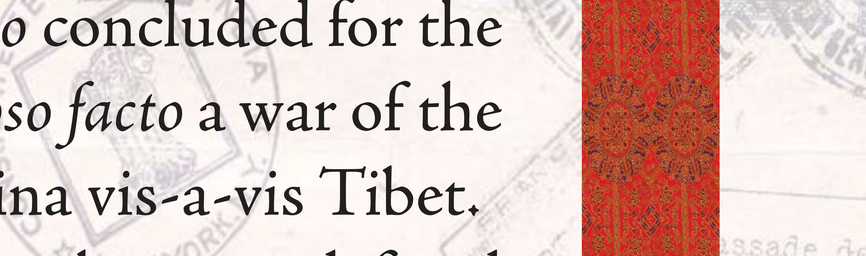
Isolated but Free

Collection Jean Lassalle

Tibetan notes

Collection Jean Lassalle

Lhasa postmark



Courtesy LTWA

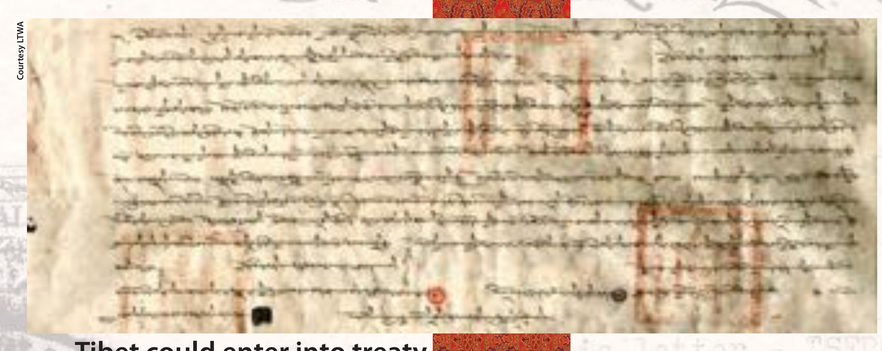
The National Geographic magazine showing the Tibetan flag (1933)

Collection Jean Lassalle

Tibetan coins

In international law, a State is suzerain if the treaties concluded by this State are *ipso facto* concluded for the vassal and if a war of a suzerain is *ipso facto* a war of the vassal. This was not the case of China vis-a-vis Tibet. Moreover, a suzerain State must have a defined territory and population, a government possessing authority over this territory and the capacity to enter into relations with other recognized States.

Tibet had all these attributes and many more, such as its own postal stamps, currency, decorations, flag, etc. The Tibetan passport was accepted by several countries until 1950.



Courtesy LTWA

Tibet could enter into treaty relation with foreign countrries

Tibetan seal

Collection Jean Lassalle

Tibetan stamps

Tibetan National Flag

Collection Jean Lassalle

Tibetan decorations

Courtesy Friends of Tibet

Tibetan passport of Tsipon Shakabpa

The Last Happy Years

Life as Usual on the Roof of the World

The young Dalai Lama

Regent Taktra Rinpoche

Life goes on

Few saw the impeding dark clouds gathering over the Tibetan plateau. However, at the end of the 1940's, Tibet slowly came out of its slumber. Goodwill and Trade delegations were sent to India and a few Western countries to assert Tibetan independence. A small army was recruited and armed by India. Indian troops were still based in Gyantse and other Indian trade marts. The British maintained their Mission in Lhasa. The Roof of the World witnessed its last happy days.

Gandhi addressing the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi. Tibetan flag is seen on the rostrum.

In March 1947, a Tibetan delegation participated in the First Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi.

Courtesy Norbulinka Institute

The Tibetan Foreign Office in Lhasa deals independently

The four *Tsipons* or Finance Secretaries

Collection Denis Roger

Shakabpa's Mission (September 1950) preparing to go to China. Finally they will not go.

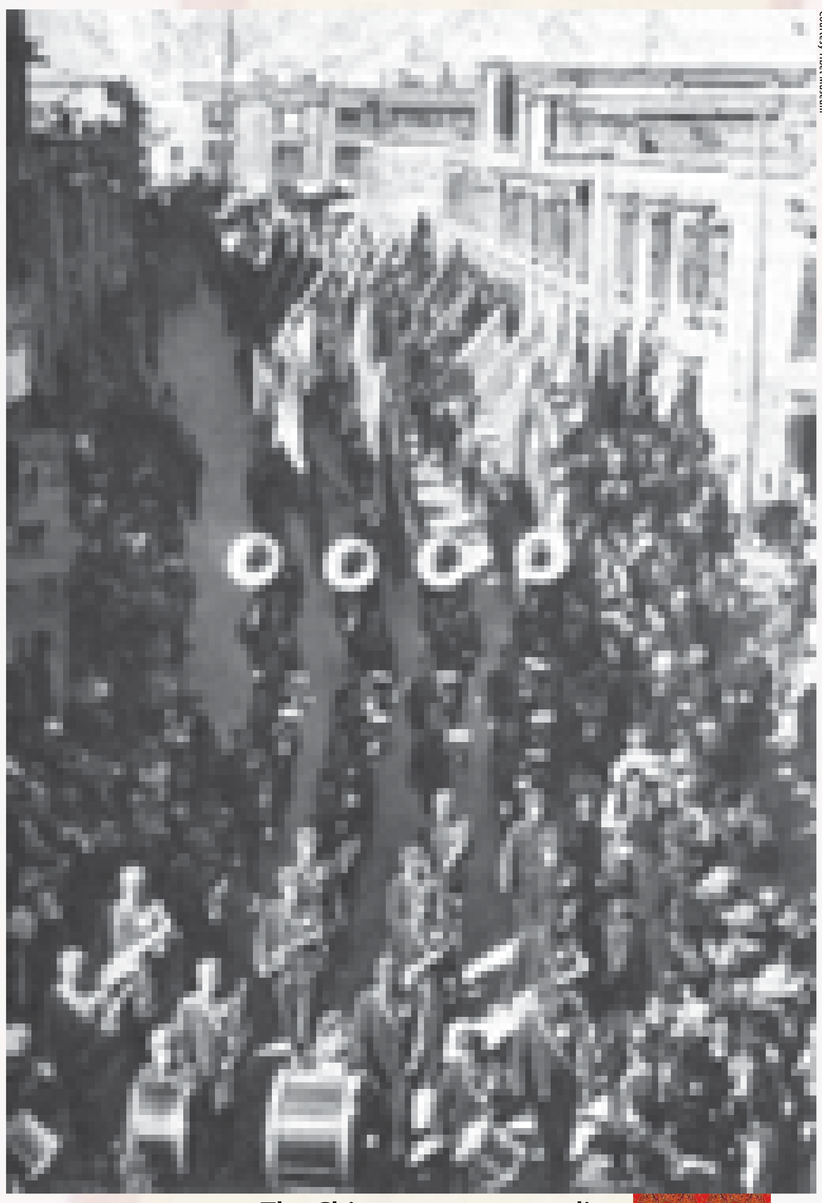
Background Photo: Dinesh Gupta

Tibet becomes a Chinese Colony

The Roof of the World invaded

Collection Denis Roger

Crossing the Yangze



Courtesy Tibet Museum

The Chinese troops parading in Lhasa (September 1951)

On October 7, 1950, 40,000 Chinese troops entered Tibet and advanced towards Chamdo, the capital of Kham province. Outnumbered, the Tibetan Army was unable to offer serious resistance to Mao's soldiers.
Tibet's independence was lost.

General Zhang Jingwu commanding the Chinese forces

Signature of the 17-Point Agreement

Seals on the Agreement

In May 1951, a 17-Point Agreement was forced on Tibetan delegates in Beijing. Tibetan seals were forged for the purpose. Article 1 of the Agreement stated: *"The Tibetan people shall unite and drive out imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet; the Tibetan people shall return to the big family of the Motherland — the People's Republic of China."*

Tibetan girls marching in Lhasa after the so-called 'liberation'

Tibetans engaged in road construction

Chinese officials inspecting the 'Liberation' Army (1951)

Glimpses on The History of Tibet

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