

On *Maṅi* and Epigraphy Four Stone Inscriptions from Spiti

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Little is known about Spiti, a high altitude river valley situated at a crossroad between Western Tibet, Ladakh, and the mountainous region of Himachal Pradesh in India (Fig.1). To date, historical sources relevant to the history of the Spiti Valley are limited and often oblique. In most cases these documents deal with the period commonly referred to as the second spread of the doctrine, when Spiti laid in the bosom of the Kingdom of Guge, from the late tenth to the mid-twelfth centuries. Notwithstanding a dearth of information about later periods, written documents retrieved from Spiti have recently started to emerge. They consist mostly of diplomatic and legal documents kept by the descendants of the local nobility (Schuh 2016), or preserved in monastic archives (Laurent *forthcoming*). In the first half of the twentieth century, however, some European scholars had the chance to study a number of stone inscriptions *in situ*. The content of these engravings seemed important at the time, but copies of these epigraphs were not published and the historical information they contained fell into oblivion.

The present article analyses four *maṅi* stone inscriptions from Spiti. The first three documents were retrieved by Henry Lee Shuttleworth in 1918. They are currently part of Shuttleworth's collection of unpublished papers preserved at the British Library. The fourth inscription was found by the author during fieldwork in summer 2016. The dates of these epigraphs span from the late sixteenth to the first half of the eighteenth century. In addition to historical information, these inscriptions represent a unique corpus with regard to compositional features and phraseology. Their content stresses the importance of epigraphic documentation for the study of Tibet and the Himalayas and raises questions about the nature and function of inscribed *maṅi* stones.

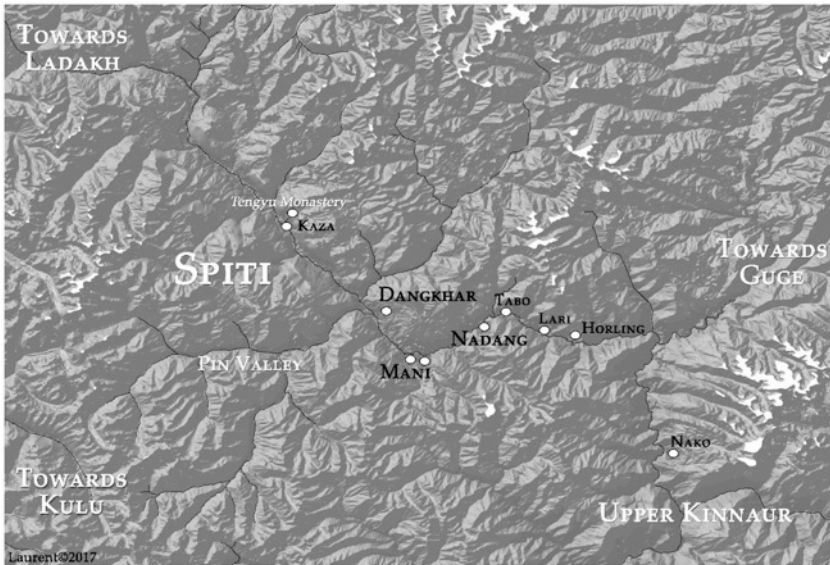


Figure 1. The Spiti Valley and the main places discussed in the text. Map: the author, 2017.

Maṇi stones: state of the art

A typological approach to *maṇi* walls is beyond the scope of this research. It is nevertheless important to recall some basic characteristics. *Maṇi* stones are found on *maṇi* walls, an architectural feature ubiquitous across the Tibetan Buddhist world.¹ These walls come in all shapes and sizes measuring a few meters up to several hundred meters in length. They can be built within villages or along the paths leading to them. Likewise they are found in monastic compounds, at the top of mountain passes, or even on high desert plateaus. These devotional structures derive their name from Avalokiteśvara's six syllable *mantra*, *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, which is repeatedly carved on *maṇi* stones. Other formulae are similarly engraved, along with excerpts from Buddhist *sūtra* texts. In a small number of cases, as we shall see, donor inscriptions find their way onto their surface, too. In addition, these votive stones may bear figurative representations, such as Buddhist deities, *stūpa* monuments, and portraits of religious figures. A recurring theme on

¹ The production of engraved stones is not exclusive to Tibetan Buddhism. Bon mantras, for instance, are also being carved on stones and are sometimes arranged in similar types of architectural features. I am not aware, however, of any research on this topic, nor am I able to comment on the possibility of Bon epigraphs akin to inscribed *maṇi* stones.

maṇi stones, for example, is the depiction of a group called the three classes of protectors (*rigs gsum mgon po*) — whether in the form of deities or *stūpas* — suggesting from the outset the polysemic value of their function. These texts and images can be carved in high relief on slabs, large pebbles, and slates. Some stones are left in a raw state while others are painted.

Despite being an integral part of the Himalayan landscape these monuments have not retained the attention of many Tibetologists. In fact, the scholarly literature devoted to the subject is surprisingly sparse. Two specific articles devoted to the *maṇi* walls of Bhutan define them as a communication medium in the service of a religious and political project (Ardussi 2004, 2006). According to John Ardussi, the reappropriation of these monuments as public media began around the seventeenth century when religious hierarchs used stone inscriptions to promote and reaffirm religious values and secular law. In this process the names of rulers, donors, and stone carvers also began to appear in epigraphs, representing an important source of information for the study of social history. His analysis of the Ura inscription stresses in particular the impetus to the production of *maṇi* stones along with the accumulation of merit under the injunction of the third 'Brug sde srid, dPon slob Mi 'gyur brtan pa (1613–1681). The *maṇi* walls of Bhutan thus worked as religious monuments and public message boards, namely as “a medium of communication created by local communities to cement the social fabric and to articulate a common dedication to the principles of Buddhism” (Ardussi 2006 : 17).

Anthropologist Monia Chies has taken an active interest in the pilgrimage site of Gyanak Mani (*rgya nag maṇi*) in Upper Kham, which she describes as “a vast array of shrines with tens of thousands of *maṇi*-stones” forming the core of a *maṇḍala* complex (Chies 2014 : 320). The ethno-historical approach adopted in her work explores the development of Gyanak Mani as a pilgrimage circuit, its dismantlement during the Cultural Revolution, together with its cultural revitalization process and post-mortem dimension in the aftermaths of the earthquake that devastated the urban area of Yushu in April 2010. According to the literary tradition, Gyanak Mani was founded in 1715 by a yogi named rGya nag rTogs ldan in fulfilment of a prophecy made by Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Following Toni Huber's work on pilgrimage (Huber 1999), the author examines the place-making process at work whereby *maṇi* stones are support of worship (*rten*) which, once they are piled up and arranged together to form a *maṇi* wall, operate as a power place (*gnas chen*) and a source of empowerment (*byin rlabs*) within a sacred route (*gnas skor*). As part of a larger ethnographic project, the author recalls the economic

dimension of pilgrimage. For example, the sacred stones are traditionally traded or exchanged at Gyanak Mani during religious festivals. Moreover, local and outsider pilgrims would frequently visit the site — and presumably purchase and offer *maṇi* stones — following the death of a relative in accordance with the Buddhist belief in transmigration and psychopompal rituals prescribed to this effect. This Tibetan Buddhist worldview is, as we will see, often supported by epigraphical evidence. After the Yushu earthquake, the pilgrimage site of Gyanak Mani was gradually restored. On this occasion, thousands of *maṇi* stones used for construction purposes in the city during the 1960-70s were eventually dug out from the rubble and cleaned by a local *maṇi* society (*ma ṇi tshogs pa*) in an attempt to generate spiritual merit before being put back upon the sacred monument. Interpreted in terms of 'de-disasterization', Chies concludes that "the analysis of 'identification and contiguity' aspects with this *gnas* has proven to be a valid approach to explain not only the historical features of the Gyanak Mani site but also to delineate the most remarkable post-earthquake re-integration activities and cultural responses in this earthquake area".

The periodic cleaning of *maṇi* stones by Himalayan people has also been observed in the Langtang Valley in Nepal. Between 2009 and 2014, an international team of geologists and environmental scientists studied the growth rate of *Rhizocarpon geographicum*, a lichen found on *maṇi* walls, as a potential dating technique (Emerman et al 2016). In doing so, their scientific analysis was complemented by ethnographic fieldwork in order to better apprehend the historical and functional dimensions of these monuments. Local informants interviewed in this regard, however, often presented differing views. While acknowledging the absence of historical evidence, they generally believed that the *maṇi* walls in their region were constructed some 400-600 years ago. They observed that most stones are carved with Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable *mantra*. In a few instances, people who were able to read Tibetan script recognised that these blocks also bear the names of other deities and even "sometimes the name of parents are carved". The date of construction of the walls remains generally unknown. One informant, however, underlined that many engravings indicated a Tibetan calendar year, such as 'Tiger Year' or 'Snake Year'. Finally, it was suggested that *maṇi* walls were originally erected to keep dangerous animals away from human settlements. Occasionally, some of them might have been constructed, or rebuilt, in areas prone to landslides, rock falls, and avalanches. This last aspect offers an innovative approach to the location, alignment, and function of some

remotely situated *maṇi* walls as landslide warnings (Weidinger 2001, 2002).

As a result of this study, the analysis of lichen growth to date Buddhist sacred walls appears relatively limited in scope. The organic nature of these structures built at ground level, where new carved stones are being deposited on top of older ones and where local communities are periodically engaged in cleaning some of them thoroughly,² will likely reduce the use of lichenometry for archaeological purposes. Interviews conducted among the local population, however, reaffirmed the presence of written information other than the ordinary Buddhist prayers and formulae traditionally engraved. Accordingly, the inscribed *maṇi* stones of Langtang may still be located within the realm of historical and epigraphical analysis.

The study of historical inscriptions has been the primary focus of Kurt Tropper's work in the Western Himalayas. A series of three articles in particular addresses the subject of *maṇi* walls. At first, the epigraphist and Tibetologist argues that the practice of engraving Buddhist tenets and *mantras* on stone is consistent with Mahāyāna literature insofar as the production and dissemination of Buddhist texts are often advocated as a meritorious act (Tropper 2007a). The underlying notion is that accumulating merit can improve both individual and collective *karman*, possibly leading to a higher or better rebirth, or even to Buddhahood. As a result, *maṇi* stones are often sponsored for the sake of a donor's spiritual progress, or for a deceased parent in accordance with the principle of transferring merit to others. A modern stone inscription from the Pin Valley in Spiti, for instance, attests to the construction of a *maṇi* wall in memoriam of a man named mGon po, an optative expression of filial piety requesting the departed to be cleansed of all negative actions and to be reborn in the pure land of Sukhāvātī (Tropper 2007b).³ Similarly, it is not unusual to find dedicatory inscriptions including all sentient beings in the process. Alternatively, the pursuit of merit-making may also simply involve the circumambulation of *maṇi* walls and the simultaneous recitation of *mantras*.

² About 68% of the twenty-four *maṇi* walls studied were cleaned in the last 4-38 years, with an average of 13 years.

³ Tshe 'khor ba thog mtha' med pa na bsags pa'i sdig sgrib dang / las ngan pa'i rnam par smin pa dang / bag chags ngan pa'i tshogs thams cad byang zhing dag nas / sangs rgyas kyi zhing khams bde ba can du skye bar shog /; "May he be reborn in the Buddha field of Sukhāvātī through the purification and elimination of accumulated wrongdoings and defilements, fully mature negative actions, and of all collections of bad karmic imprints in the beginning and endless circle of life", translation mine. For a translation of this passage in German; see (Tropper 2007b).

Generally, *maṇi* walls may arise and expand over time, observes Tropper, as a result of pilgrims' devotion in which case the age of these monuments can no longer be established with any degree of certainty. In other cases, the construction of a particular *maṇi* wall may be commissioned as a single act of religious fervour performed by a patron or a group of benefactors. As with the Ura wall of Bhutan, a donor inscription can be found on a separate stone, from which can be gleaned the reasons as to why the monument was erected along with the names of the donor, stone carver, and other agents. The so-called donor inscription is often positioned at a prominent place such as in the middle or at one of the extremities; it may offer the means to determine when it was built (Tropper 2007a).

A donor inscription at Nako in Upper Kinnaur is a good example of some of the features described above (Tropper 2009). The inscription is located inside a niche at the north-western end of a *maṇi* wall measuring approximately one hundred meters in length. Following a religious praise and a devotional opening, the epigraph states that Phun tshogs dbang po, a man from an illustrious line of ancestors, had a thousand *maṇi* formulae inscribed on immutable stones (*mi 'gyur rdo la maṇi stong ra bzhengs*). The establishment of the wall per se is further supported by the aspiration of the donor to see the *maṇi* stones of hundreds of travellers appear there in the future (*'di la 'grul mi rnams kyi maṇi brgya rtsa re snang ba zhu zhu*). As for the reasons given for commissioning the wall, they are large in scope and imbued with altruistic motives. They include the fulfilment of a lama's aspiration (*bla ma'i thugs dgongs rdzogs phyir*) — presumably the donor's own preceptor —, but also the attainment of awakening (*byang chub thob phyir du*) for the donor, his parents, relatives, a local lord, and, more generally, for all sentient beings.

A final point worthy of note is the situational character expressed by the inscription at Nako. As a constitutive element of the wall, the donor's epigraph asserts loudly and clearly its territorial position whilst reiterating its function within a greater Buddhist landscape. After an exclamatory expression of wonder (*e ma ho*), the stone declares, "Here at the royal site of Nako, a land where the ten virtues abound" (*yul dge bcu 'dzoms pa'i na go rgyal sa dir*), so-and-so did such and such. As we shall go on to examine, the stone inscriptions from Spiti go a step further in defining their geographical location and political affiliation.

Epigraphic survey of the Spiti Valley

The archaeological exploration of the Spiti Valley began in the early twentieth century under the aegis of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). In 1909, the German missionary August Hermann Francke (1870–1930) was hired to conduct a four month archaeological survey of Western Tibet. As an expert in ‘local history and antiquities’ Francke combined an assessment of ancient monuments with an epigraphical documentation. During his survey of the Spiti Valley the German scholar reported about eight stone inscriptions located in the villages, or in the vicinity of, Horling, Tabo, Lari and Kaza. On July 26th, for instance, the scholar spotted several *maṇi* stones that stood out from the regular Buddhist engravings. Francke saw that they bore the names of Tsong kha pa and three of his main disciples. One of them, Lha dbang blo gros, is believed to have been particularly active in the region. A cursive palaeographic analysis of these inscriptions led him to assert that the stones were carved in the fifteenth century. Likely “put up on the roadside during the Lamaist reformation, and later on placed on or near *maṇi* walls”, Francke concluded that “they testify to the enthusiasm with which Tsongkhapa’s reformation was welcomed in these tracts”.⁴

In the same way, the Moravian scholar noted down the names of other significant actors involved in the regional history of Western Tibet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, two epigraphs mentioned the King of Guge, Khri bKra shis grags pa, who resided at Tsaparang before his forcible exile in the neighbouring Kingdom of Ladakh around 1630.⁵ Similarly another inscribed stone

⁴ “The 26th July was spent in the same desert on our march to Horling, a desert camping-place on the Spiti river. I had expected to have an archaeological holiday in this uninhabitable region. But that was not so. Strange to say, we passed by *maṇi* walls, from time to time, and several of the stones placed on, or by the side of, the walls were of unusual interest. I found here four or five stones which must have been carved in the 15th century. They contained the names of the great reformer Tsong-kha-pa and three of his contemporaries, mKhas-grub-pa (1384–1437), Lha-dbang-blo-gros (1388 –1462), and dGe ’adun-grub (1389–1473). What points in particular to their ancient origin is the fact, that in these inscriptions the e, o, and u vowel signs are all directly joined to their consonant bases. These stones were, in all probability, put up on the roadside during the Lamaist reformation, and later on placed on or near *maṇi* walls. They testify to the enthusiasm with which Tsongkhapa’s reformation was welcomed in these tracts.” (Francke 1914 : 35-36).

⁵ “The name of the king who is mentioned on the votive tablet, is Khri-bkra-shis-grags-pa-lde. This name is not found in the genealogical tree, and therefore he must be one of the later members of the second Lde dynasty from Purang. He cannot well have reigned before 1600 A.D., for *maṇi* walls were hardly ever constructed before that time [...] This supposition is strengthened by the

gave the name of a district officer named Ga ga bSod nams who sojourned at Dangkhar, the capital of Spiti, at "the time of the Ladakhi regime".⁶ The *maṇi* stones documented also contributed, to a minor extent, to the study of the social history of Spiti. In one of the cases cited earlier, Francke observed that the *maṇi* wall near Horling, where the name of the King of Guge was identified, had been commissioned by a man from the village of rGyu mkhar. His ethnographic enquiries into the paternal family lineages of Spiti also revealed that "every *pha-spun-ship* has to look after the cremation of their dead, and monuments in commemoration of the dead, *mchod-rten* or *maṇi* walls, are generally erected by the whole *pha-spun-ship* of a certain village, and the name of the particular *pha-spun-ship* is found on the votive tablets of such monuments" (Francke 1914 : 48).

Regrettably, the Tibetan inscriptions discussed in the narrative account of Francke's two-week survey of the Spiti Valley were never published in extenso; none of them have been passed down to us at this time.

A similar fate seemed to await the stone inscriptions recorded by Henry Lee Shuttleworth (1882–1960) during his tenure as Assistant Commissioner of Kulu. Between 1912 and 1924, the British officer and orientalist played a pioneering role in the exploration of the Western Himalayas. His efforts to write the first ever history of Spiti exceeded those of Francke's and culminated in a rich collection of handwritten documents and photographs now preserved at the British Library in London (Laurent *forthcoming*). During his second trip to the Spiti Valley in July 1918, Shuttleworth recopied three epigraphs found on *maṇi* stones at the villages of Mani and Dangkhar. These historical inscriptions are the foci of this research and will be discussed further in the following section.

Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984) is likely to be the last scholar who took a vague interest in the epigraphic record of the Spiti valley. In the footsteps of Francke and Shuttleworth, the Italian Tibetologist reached Spiti in the summer of 1933. Tucci's scholarly contribution to the history of the region remained largely ensconced within the chronological framework of the second spread of Buddhism in West

discovery of a similar votive tablet which I made three days after at Tabo in Spiti. This contained the name of the same king and gave Tsaparang as his residence. But what is still more surprising, is the occurrence of the following short passage on the same tablet: 'He who clears away all the apostasy and darkness at the great palace of *Tsabarang rtse*'." (Francke 1914 : 35-36).

⁶ "The name of the capital of Spiti is spelt here *Drag-mkhar rtse* (against *Brang-mkhar* on other stones). A nobleman, Ga-ga Sod-nams, is mentioned as having held the office of Resident at the castle, but the name of the king of Leh is missing." (Francke 1914 : 45).

Tibet and the study of Buddhist art. Supplementing a series of works on these topics, an account of his scientific expedition in the Western Himalayas was co-authored with Eugenio Ghersi (1904–1997), a young medical officer and photographer who accompanied Tucci on his journey.

While in Spiti, the scientific exploration of the valley led them to take the steep and narrow track to the Sakya monastery of Tengyu, an impressive monastic bastion perched on top of a vertiginous precipice far above the modern district capital of Kaza. After an exhausting ascension under a blazing sun, the two men had to prove their worth and cultural sensitivity by taking a small detour around a *maṇi* wall, under the scrutiny of the local monastic community. “Tired and breathless as we were”, explain the Italian explorers, “we have to adapt ourselves to the custom of every devout pilgrim and make the ritual circuit of an interminable little wall covered with stones, on which is cut the sacred formula of Avalokiteśvara. We are able to examine only one by one and to photograph the votive inscriptions, almost all of the time of the king of Ladakh *Ñi ma rnam rgyal*; they are important because they preserve the name of certain Gagas, as they call the Nonos of Spiti, and they show that their family is derived from ancient rulers who administered the district in the name of the Ladakh kings” (Tucci & Ghersi 1935 : 43-44).

What happened to the pictures of these inscriptions taken by Ghersi is not known. Two prints illustrating the monastery of Tengyu and a group of Sakya monks performing monastic dances were eventually published in *Secrets of Tibet*. They suggest that the photographic documentation of that day found its way back to Europe and may still be available in the Tucci’s Fund in Rome (IsIAO). At present, and without Tucci’s photographic archives, we are left with a sense of the importance of stone inscriptions for the study of Spiti. The recurring mention of local officials, who acted on behalf of the neighbouring Kingdom of Ladakh, underlines the geopolitical complexity prevalent in the region after the mid-seventeenth century. It is also becoming increasingly apparent that the use of *maṇi* stones throughout the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas often exceeded the scope of Buddhist praxis.

Four stone inscriptions from Spiti

The study of *maṇi* stone inscriptions cannot dispense with an analysis of their archaeological context, namely their locations, functions, and potential chronological markers. The epigraphs under discussion here were all documented in the Spiti Valley, yet none of them can be directly connected to a particular *maṇi* wall. There is no doubt,

however, that they were all *maṇi* stones and as such had once belonged to a larger structure, such as those observed in Bhutan, Kham, Nepal, and Upper Kinnaur.

In this regard, compositional features — and sometimes Buddhist imagery — confirm the primary use of these stones as votive objects. These epigraphs invariably start with a religious opening. It pays homage to a list of core Buddhist ideas in the stone from Lower Mani (SI2), while it opens with an invocation to Avalokiteśvara in the remaining inscriptions (SI1, SI3, SI4). In effect, the epigraphs from Dangkhar and Nadang (SI1, SI4) address the exact same praise to Avalokiteśvara, whereby his spiritual activity is described as that of a universal monarch (*cakravartin*) and a Buddha of the Fortunate Aeon (*bhadrakalpa*), suggesting perhaps the use of stock phrases by stone carvers in Spiti.

The devotional nature of these inscriptions is further emphasised in the donative section. Individual donors, too, are being praised for their generosity and altruistic endeavours. They are specifically honoured for having commissioned the engraving of the supreme six-syllable *mantra* (*gsung mchog yi ge drug ma*) (SI1), the making of *maṇi* on immutable stones (*mi 'gyur rdo la ma Ni*) (SI2), and the production of a thousand holy and sublime *maṇi* stones (*dam chos khyad 'phags ma Ni*) (SI4). The other circumstances that led to these donations will be discussed for each epigraph. Suffice to note here that the inscribed stones under review were all intended to be offered and deposited atop a *maṇi* wall.

As it is often the case with non-literary and epigraphic work, the orthography of these stone inscriptions is rarely straightforward and some passages will need further clarification. The inscriptions are presented in English translation, whilst the original Tibetan text and a normalised transliteration are given in the appendix. These inscriptions follow a similar template, except for SI3 which is too short to conform entirely to this model, and therefore offer an interesting avenue for the study of epigraphy. Each inscription is composed of three sections: (1) a religious opening in the form of a praise or invocation (*mchod brjod*); (2) a cosmological and territorial description; (3) and a donative narration and dedication. These epigraphs tend to begin and/or finish with auspicious Sanskrit formulae and symbols (e.g. *siddham*, *maṅgala*). They are also punctuated with Tibetan interjections such as *kjee* and *kje lags*, specifically between the first and second sections. These exclamatory expressions, and the use of vocative forms, seem to confer on these stones a certain performative function. I will return to this aspect in the final discussion.

The stone inscription from Dangkhar (SI1)

The first inscription was found by Shuttleworth at Dangkhar (*brag mkhar/grang khar*) in July 1918. The copy of the text, which is now at the British Library, indicates that it was carved on a large green blackish stone of approximately 18 by 13 inches (45.7x33cm), together with an image of Vajrapāṇi (Shuttleworth : MssEur D722/8) (Fig. 2). In his unfinished manuscript on the history of Spiti, however, Shuttleworth offered further information specifying that the epigraph had been found “in a small temple on the roof of Drangkhar fort”.⁷ His clarification is significant for two reasons. First, it indicates that the stone had been removed from its original location. Second, it suggests that a conscious choice was made to transfer and preserve it inside the district fort of the old capital, a place expressly stated in the epigraph.

Om̐. May this be auspicious!

I bow down to the Venerable Avalokiteśvara who has a thousand hands like a thousand Universal Monarchs; who has a thousand eyes like a thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon; and who displays whatever is necessary to tame and guide each and every one.

Hail! May the helmet of the Dharma King Seng ge rnam rgyal be high on top of the Victorious Palace erected on the promontory of the Great [capital of] Leh on the right side of the flowing Indus River. Hail! On top of Dangkhar in his dominion of Spiti, let Ga ga Tshe ring rnam rgyal enjoy a long life.

Hail! The patron [and] minister Tshe ring bkra shis, whose noble ancestry is the minister family of Par ca, is praised for having accomplished the great deed of completing and accumulating two hundred of the supreme six-syllable mantras for the sake of holding high the helmet of the king and the ministers. [His] sister is

⁷ “An inscribed votive stone tablet, found by the writer in 1918 in a small temple on the roof of Drangkhar fort names both *Señ-ge-rnam.rgyal* and *Ga-ga Tshe-rin-rnam.rgyal* of the family of *Par-cha Blon-po* (minister), who was apparently the ruler of Spiti under this king of Leh. The king’s name also occurs in a book dedication sheet found at Drangkhar in 1908, and in a wall inscription in the small entrance shrine at *Lha - lung*, as well as in other inscriptions or documents of these parts.” (Shuttleworth : MssEur D722/25).

from the immaculate lineage of 'Od gsal lha. The patron, Lady Jo co 'Dzoms lags, supplied sustenance, [like] a divine nectar, to the people, delighting those receiving the offerings. How wonderful!

This first inscription can be dated without any major difficulty to the last decade of King Seng ge rnam rgyal's life (c. 1590–1642). As a result of the conquest of Guge in the early 1630s, Spiti came under his dominion and officials were appointed in order to administer the small valley on behalf of the king of Ladakh. From that time onward, these representatives were titled Ga ga or No no depending on the period, their age and their seniority (Petech 1977 : 155-156; 1997 : 249). They are believed to be the highest-ranking local officials in Spi-

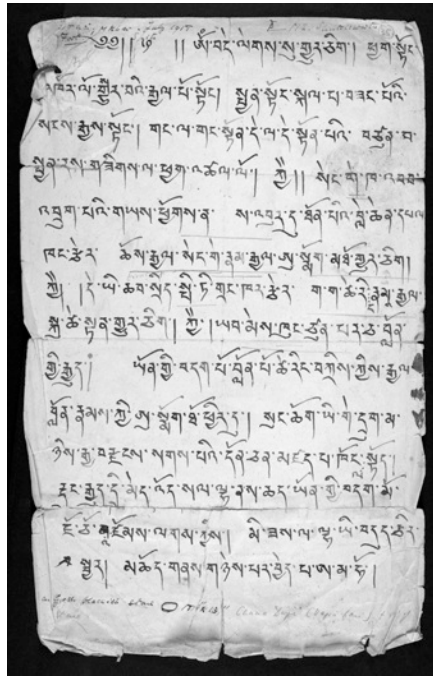


Figure 2 Paper copy of the inscription from Dangkhar retrieved by Shuttleworth in 1918.
Photo: MssEur D722/4-12 f35r © British Library Board.

ti. Subordinated to the prefect of the fort (*mkhar dpon*/*rdzong dpon*) of Ladakh, they were stationed in the district fort (*rdzong mkhar*) at Dangkhar and eventually assumed the role of local magistrate (*khrimis dpon*) (Schuh 2016 : 2-12). It is therefore along these lines that Ga ga Tshe ring rnam rgyal in the epigraph was likely the first official to be appointed by Seng ge rnam rgyal to hold office at Dangkhar,

following the integration of Spiti into the neighbouring kingdom. As for Shuttleworth's note, it remains to be determined whether Ga ga Tshe ring rnam rgyal, like the minister Tshe ring bkra shis, belonged to the Par cha minister lineage (*par cha blon po*), too.

It is generally held that the members of the *blon chen pa* family occupied an important position among the uppermost strata of Spitian society (Laurent 2013 : 127). The donative section clearly reaffirms Tshe ring bkra shis' noble paternal family lineage as being of the Par ca minister (*yab mes khung btsun par ca blon gyi rgyud*). As a benefactor (*yon gyi bdag po*) and a minister (*blon po*) himself, he is praised for upholding the power of the king and the ministers by commissioning two hundred *maṇi* stones engraved with the six-syllable mantras (*yi ge drug ma nyis brgya*). Whether Ga ga Tshe ring rnam rgyal and the minister Tshe ring bkra shis were related to each other is difficult to determine at present.⁸

The inscription also highlights the family lineage (*gdung rgyud*) of the *donatrix* (*yon gyi bdag mo*) but in terms that defy common social stratifications. Lady Jo co 'Dzoms lags is said to descend from a line of 'shining gods' (*'od gsal lha*), explaining, perhaps, her ability to transform worldly sustenance into a divine nectar (*lha'i bdu rtsi*).⁹ It may well be, however, that the *donatrix* from Dangkhar was somehow related to the Kingdom of Gung thang in West Tibet. In fact, her peculiar family ancestry occurs in two legal documents issued by the royal house of Gung thang in the fifteenth century (Schuh 1981 : 349, 364). In them, King Kun bzang nyi zla grags pa and King rGyal mchan bsod nams are both said to belong to the 'progenies of Shinning Gods' (*'od gsal lha brgyud*), offering an interesting historical precedent for 'Dzoms lags' filiation.¹⁰ It is yet clear that Lady Jo co 'Dzoms lags, like her brother, was a member of the nobility. She acted as a devout patron and generously donated food supplies to the local monastic community.

At the outset, SI1 is a vivid testimony to the religious and political influence of the *blon chen pa* family of the old capital of Spiti in the 1630s. The members of this illustrious family are still found among the people of Dangkhar today, and their ancestral home occupies a dominant position at the top of the settlement (*mkhar stod*). In fact, the

⁸ To compound matter further, it has been suggested that in the eighteenth century the *blon po* were none other than "the *mkhar dpon* of Spiti who resided at Dankhar" (Jahoda 2009 : 49-50).

⁹ Although less commonly used nowadays, the word *jo co* is an affectionate term of address for women and little girls in Spiti. I am grateful to Lochen Rinpoche for this clarification.

¹⁰ I owe Dieter Schuh a debt of gratitude for drawing my attention to these documents and their possible implication for the political history of Western Himalayan polities.

minister's house is situated immediately to the right of the district fort, where bKra shis tshe ring must have held office during the Ladakhi paramountcy (Fig. 3). The spatial proximity of the minister's household to the centre of power is not so surprising. Around the same time, the aristocratic houses of Seng ge rnam gyal's chief minister (*bka' blon*), minister (*blon po*), Munshi, together with the large household of the Rupshu's, were all located just under the walls of the king's newly built palace in Leh (Harrison 2016 : 66-69).



Figure 3 Dangkhar: view of the settlement, monastery, and district fort on top of the ridge.
Photo: Samuel Bourne, 1866 © Victoria and Albert Museum London.



Figure 4 Heap of *mani* stones, upper part of the settlement (*mkhar stod*),
Dangkhar. Photo: the author, 2014.

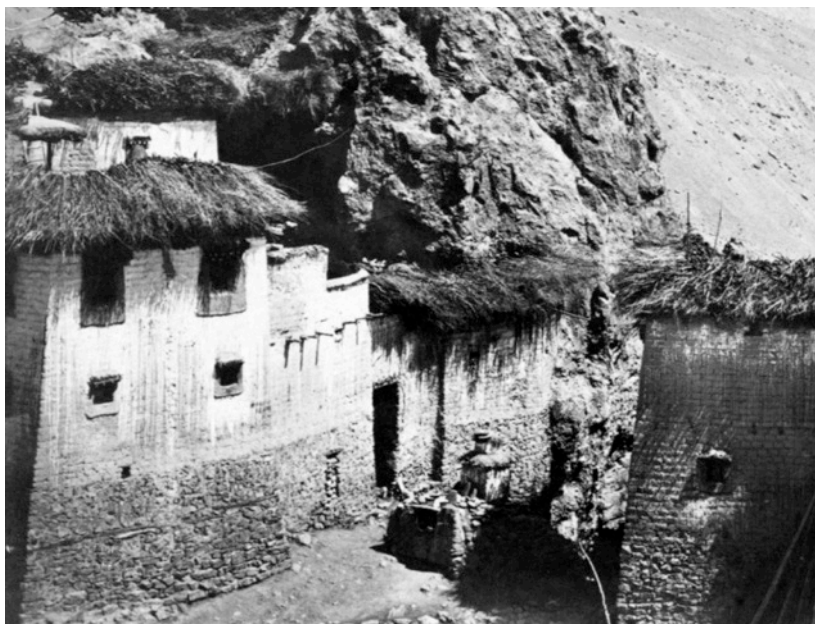


Figure 5 A *maṇi* wall built in the upper part of the settlement (*mkhar stod*) at Dangkhar.
Photo: Frank Mason Good for Francis Frith, 1869.

Today, a small heap of *maṇi* stones can still be seen not far below the district fort and the minister's house (Fig. 4). It is collectively referred to as 'thousand *maṇi*' (*maṇi stong*). A photograph taken in 1869 provides an additional view of this *maṇi* wall, which religiously marked the access to the upper part of the settlement and regulated people's comings and goings (Fig. 5). Was it the original location of SI1? There is, nonetheless, every reason to believe that bKra shis tshe ring's offering of two hundred stones contributed to the establishment of a fully-fledged *maṇi* wall somewhere in the polity. As time went by, the recording of his munificence and aristocratic filiation ensured the donor inscription to be persevered in a secure location. And what better place than the small chapel of the district fort, on top of Dangkhar, in King Seng ge rnam rgyal's dominion of Spiti (*chab srid spi ti grang khar rtser*).

The stone inscription from Lower Mani (SI2)

The following two inscriptions were captured on paper by Shuttleworth at Mani (*ma ṇi/ma nas*), a village consisting of two settlements: Lower Mani (*ma ṇi 'og ma*) and Upper Mani (*ma ṇi gong*

ma) less than a kilometre away (Fig. 6) (Shuttleworth MssEur D722/8).¹¹ The copy of SI2 kept in London indicates that the epigraph had been engraved on a white stone adorned with a representation of Padmasambhava (Fig. 7). The handwriting is quite distinct from the copy of SI1 and cannot be attributed to the hand of the British orientalist either. No other information has been made available with regard to the location where the inscription was documented.

Om svasti. May this be auspicious!

I bow down to Lord Buddha in whom the three bodies are manifest, to the noble doctrine which is enriched by the three scriptural collections, and to the noble doctrine which is enriched by the threefold trainings. I respectfully bow down to the three rare and sublime jewels.

Hail! This continent is the southern Jambudvīpa. The snowy hillsides of Mt. Kailash are the dwelling place of Foe Destroyers. The tepid abode is Lake Manasarovar. On the right side of the flowing Indus River, up in the hinterland, is the charming [village] of Mani. May the great Dharma King Nyi ma rnam rgyal live long and his dominion thrive!

The patron, Lady sGrol ma skyabs, practiced purification [and had] a hundred *mani* on immutable stones [inscribed] for the long life of the protector [and] lord, [and for her] loving and kind parents to move along the path of liberation. May this be auspicious! May external enemies be subjugated and family members be protected!¹²

¹¹ These designations may in fact suggest an expansion of the village of Mani in time, with an early Mani (*ma ni gong ma*) and a later Mani (*ma ni 'og ma*), in particular since there is no substantial difference in elevation that would justify a distinction between a lower and upper settlement.

¹² Shuttleworth's papers contain a rough translation of SI2: "Namaskar to the protectors of religion, the three divinities (1) Sanges of the three kinds (2) scriptures of the three kinds (3) genduns (lamas) of the three kinds. Listen O, good people! In the southern globe there is jambu dweep the best of all the dweeps. In this dweep is situated Kailas glacier which is the dwelling place of Dachoms (disciples of Budha). At the foot of the Kailash is the Mapang lake (lake of turquoises or Manasarovar), which is the dwelling place of Mado/Madros nag. In vicinity of this lake to the right of Bhutan runs the river which flows from the lion's mouth. To the right of this river is situated the picturesque village of Mane. {long live and flourish the just gyalpo Nima (1590-1620) Nima Namgyal} Dolma Kyabs for the long life of her kind master and for the purpose of securing

The stone inscription from Lower Mani is structurally very similar to the one previously discussed. It opens with an enumeration of Buddhist triads (i.e. *trikāya*, *tripitaka*, *triśikṣā*, and *triratna*) to which homage is paid. Then, following the interjection *kye lags* (Hail! / Listen!), the village of Mani is located within a wider Buddhist cosmographical description. Zooming in on the terrestrial world of Jambudvīpa, the narration progresses within a sacred landscape featuring the holy Mt. Kailash, Lake Manasarovar, and the Indus River. At the end of this journey stands the virtuous and mighty Dharma king (*chos rgyal chen po*) ruling over these lands.

From the occurrence of the king's name, it can be deduced that SI2 was made during Nyi ma rnam rgyal's reign (r. c.1694–1738). Nyi ma rnam rgyal ruled over Spiti and Purig together with bKra shis rnam rgyal until 1738. Literary and epigraphic sources often praise the former for his religious activities throughout Tibet and Ladakh. The Ladakhi king is said to have made lavish offerings to monastic communities and temples, commissioning images, texts, and even long *maṇi* walls made of slates (*rdza nang gi maṇi ring mo*) (Laurent



Figure 6 The village of Mani: upper (or later) settlement on the left and lower (or early) settlement to the right of the centre. Photo: the author, 2016.

heaven for her parents inscribed a hundred names on such stones the inscriptions from which can not be effaced. There be peace. The enemies may perish and the relatives may flourish." (Shuttleworth MssEurD722/8).

2014 : 131-133). His involvement in the local affairs of Spiti is also attested, albeit elusively. As mentioned earlier, Tucci witnessed the name of this king carved on several *mani* stones at Tengyu. Based on

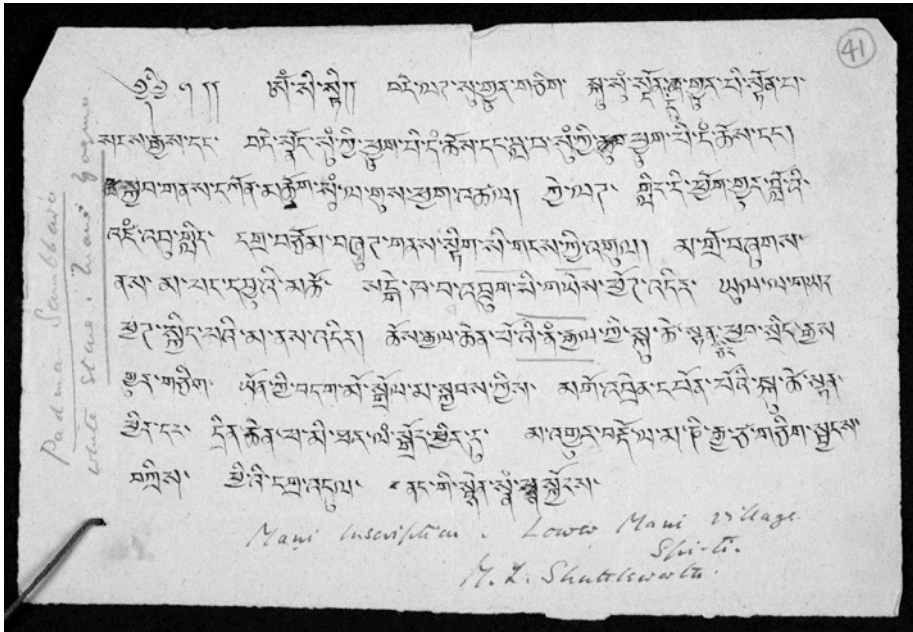


Figure 7 Paper copy of the inscription from Lower Mani retrieved by Shuttleworth in 1918. Photo: MssEur D722/4-12 f41r © British Library Board.

the reading of these inscriptions, the Italian scholar believed that Nyi ma rnam rgyal had a palace at Kaza and participated in the renovation of the Sakya monastery.¹³ Tucci’s observation has yet to be called into question.¹⁴ On the whole, it does not exclude the

¹³ “In the inscriptions the usual form is: *k’ar* (= *mk’ar*) *rtse*. According to some of these inscriptions there was at Kaze a palace (*p’o bran*) of the kings of Ladakh, when Spiti passed under the rule of that dynasty, and the restorer of the gompa was *Ni ma rnam rgyal* (seventeenth century), the king whom P. Desideri met when he passed through Ladakh on his ways to Lhasa in 1715.” (Tucci & Ghersi 1935 : 41 : 1).

¹⁴ Faithfully following Tucci on the matter, Luciano Petech wrote, “In 1933 G. Tucci found a group of inscriptions of this king at *mk’ar-rtse* (Kaja) in Spiti. A palace of the Ladakhi kings existed there, and *Ni-ma-rnam-rgyal* caused the *Sa-skyapa* monastery of *mk’ar-rtse* to be renovated.” (Petech 1977 : 82-83). More recently, however, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub proposes to relocate Tucci’s ‘*k’ar rtse*’ based on a geographical description found in a document pertaining to Spiti and dated to the reign of King *Tshe dpal rnam rgyal* (r. c. 1802 –1837). “Though our text that mentions a *pho brang chen po* seems to support Tucci’s observation, among other

possibility that other places and monastic communities benefitted from the king's largesse and patronage as Spiti was still under the suzerainty of Ladakh (Laurent 2014).

As for the donative section, it is a classic example of Mahāyāna praxis whereby the merits generated by a virtuous action are transferred to others. In this case, the *donatrix*, Lady sGrol ma skyabs, dedicated one hundred *maṇi* stones to the wellbeing of her family. Her gesture did not only intend to accompany her parents — who presumably passed away — on the path of liberation (*thar lam*), but also to ensure the long life (*sku tshe brten*) of an anonymous benefactor (*mgo 'dren*) and lord (*dpon po*). There is nothing to indicate in the use of these terms whether the latter was a religious figure, a member of the ruling aristocracy, or even the donor's husband. From the dedication itself, we still get the sense that sGrol ma skyabs' relatives were experiencing some adverse circumstances, possibly calling for the subjugation of external threats (*phyi yi dgra 'dul*).

The stone inscription from Mani (SI3)

The second stone inscription recorded by Shuttleworth at Mani, the settlement of which is not specified, is the shortest in length (Shuttleworth MssEur D722/8). Moreover, the reproduction of this epigraph furnishes no information whatsoever about the stone and its location.

Om svasti siddham.

I bow down to the Buddha, in whom the three bodies are manifest, and to Avalokiteśvara.

hypotheses," explains the Indologist, "one could take «mkhar rtse» as a common name or also as an abbreviation of Grag mkhar rtse of 1.14. The description that follows (1.10-11) nicely fits to Drang mkhar, present Dankar (Fig. 8.1), as well as to the castles/fortresses built on the summit of rocky mountains. As we may note, our text mentions two *rgyal sa, na*. Rang rig, hosting a *mkhar dpon* and Drang mkhar (cf. infra n.112) where the *rdzong dpon chen po* resides, see Table I." (Scherrer-Schaub 2013 : 129). Her hypothesis was rendered moot by Dieter Schuh who has recently pointed to her faulty reading of that passage (Schuh 2016 : 92-93). The reasons given by the German historian and Tibetologist are particularly relevant for the present article. As it will be discussed later, the territorial description under scrutiny is a recurring trope found in many epigraphs and stone inscriptions from the Western Himalayas. It follows a defined sequence in which regional authorities are mentioned after the reference to the ruling sovereign.

Hail! The pious patron [offered this]. May the monk Nam mkha' rgya mtsho's adversity and obstacles of this life be appeased! [And may he] be reborn in Sukhāvātī [in his] next life!

Despite its brevity, SI3 is still composed of two distinct sections. It begins with a homage to the Buddha's *trikāya* and to the compassionate Avalokiteśvara. As for the donative section, it does not bring much grist to the mill of social history. The name of the donor is unknown.¹⁵ The recipient of the virtuous offering is a monk (*dge slong*) named Nam mkha' rgya mtsho, likely nearing the end of life.

The stone inscription from Nadang (SI4)

The last inscription was found by the author at Nadang (*na dang*) during fieldwork in the summer of 2016. The small hamlet of Nadang is located a few kilometres upstream from Tabo on the right side of the Spiti River. The stone is now preserved inside a small chapel at the foot of the main altar (Fig. 8). The inscription was carved in high relief on the flat surface of a naturally polished stone of approximately 49 by 23 centimetres (Fig. 9).

I bow down to the Venerable Avalokiteśvara who has a thousand hands like a thousand Universal Monarchs; who has a thousand eyes like a thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon; and who displays whatever is necessary to tame and guide each and every one.

Hail! The best continent is the southern Jambudvīpa. To the left side of the flowing Indus River, praise the Dharma King Khri Grags pa lde! At Dangkhar under his dominion, praise the lord Yid rgyal!

In the land of Nadang where prosperity and happiness melt, the faithful patron mKon mchog tshe ring had one

¹⁵ In the present context, the absence of additional grammatical particles does not permit to tell whether the 'pious patron' (*dad ldan yon gyi bdag po*) designates the donor himself/herself or the recipient of the donation, namely the monk Nam mkha' rgya mtsho. However, the use of a similar expression in SI4, followed this time by the donor's name and an amended agentive particle, would tend to indicate that the 'pious patron' does not qualify the beneficiary but rather stands for the anonymous donor.

thousand holy and sublime *maṇi* stones made for the development of the temple's assembly. Likewise the faithful patron, Lady Jo co Chog pa, transformed sustenance into nectar. What the second lord did is marvellous. Their relatives and friends also had outsiders [and] commodities dispatched. How wondrous!

Compositional features are by now easily recognisable. The donor inscription from Nadang begins with the exact same homage to Avalokiteśvara as the one found at Dangkhar (SI1). The next section is introduced by the exclamatory figure of speech *kye lags*. It continues with a geographical description combining several of the tropes observed in the previous epigraphs. From the Indus River to Nadang, the jurisdiction of the territory recounted is said to be under the *cakravartin* Khri Grags pa lde and his Spitian subordinate. As a result, SI4 can be dated to the first three decades of the seventeenth century.

SI4 is therefore the earliest epigraph in our possession. Incidentally, it confirms observations made by Francke on two separate occasions during his survey of the Spiti Valley. King bKra shis grags pa lde (r. c. 1606–1630) was the last ruling king of Guge, a kingdom established by his forefathers in the tenth century. In the *Chos 'byung pa'i yid 'phrog*, a historical work chiefly focused on West Tibet, the author, Zhang zhung pa dPal'byor bzang po (b. 1552), offers a concise tribute to the monarch: “The divine throne holder, lHa'i dbang phyug (lit. lord of the gods) bKra shis grags pa lde, too, from a young age, conquered political power and a mighty realm. [By gaining] the respect of long-time domestic rivals and the like, both the religious and the temporal sphere thrived”.¹⁶ As such, the people of Spiti were under his power (*khong gi mnga'og*) and a lord (*dpon po*) represented his interests at the capital of Spiti.¹⁷ That is to say until the year 1630, when Khri Grags pa lde was deposed by the King Seng ge nam rgyal of Ladakh. With the fall of Tsaparang and the forcible exile of the last king of Guge, Spiti changed hands for good. With SI1 and SI4, we have therefore two stone inscriptions representing a pivotal moment for the history of the region, yet remarkably similar in composition and references.

¹⁶ / lha khrid lha'i dbang phyug bkris grags pa lde yang sku gzhon nu nas rgyal srid phyug btsan zhing mnga' thang rgyal / phas rgol ngang gi 'dud pa sogs chos 'jig rten gnyis ka dar la rgyas song /; (Vitali 2012b : 215 : 8-11). For a different translation of this passage and, more generally, on Khri Grags pa lde; see (Vitali 2012a : 57).

¹⁷ The term *yid rgyal* is an abbreviation for 'wish-fulfilling king of power' (*yid bzhin dbang rgyal*). It is not entirely clear in the present context if it designates the name of a person or if it is used as an epithet.



Figure 8 Inscribed stone at the foot of the altar inside the temple at Nadang.
Photo: the author, 2016.

From the donative section, it stands out that the local monastic congregation (*lha khang gi tshogs*) of Nadang received the patronage of several benefactors led by the faithful patron (*dad ldan yon gyi bdag po*) mKon mchog tshe ring and the donor (*yon gyi bdag mo*) Lady Jo co Chog pa. The nature of their support is somewhat reminiscent of Tshe ring bkra shis and Lady Jo co 'Dzoms lags' at Dangkar. Only this time, one thousand sacred and magnificent *maṇi* stones (*dam chos khyad 'phags ma ṇi*) were produced for the occasion, while the *donatrix* is still confined to her role of the divine nurturing mother. Joining them in the effort, an anonymous lord (*dpon*) with his relatives and

friends (*gnyen grogs rnams*) appeared to have supported the local temple, too.

Overall, it generally transpires from the donative section a sense of wealth and abundance. Indeed, Nadang is described further up in the inscription as a land where prosperity and happiness (*g.yang chags skyid pa*) convene. This idea, however, does not accord well with the present settlement or with even the vestiges visible in and around the hamlet today. When Francke toured Spiti in 1909, the situation was already indicative of a different material state. The German scholars then noted, “On the other bank of the Spiti river, we saw the large monastery of Nathang with many terraced fields round about it, some under cultivation, but most of them bare. The monastery is built in three stories, the one above always a little narrower than the one below it, like a pyramid of three steps, thus reminding me of Alchi (and also of the mTho-lding) monastery. Nathang also is said to have been founded in the days, when the Tabo monastery was built. During summer, there is not a single lama residing in it.” (Francke 1914 : 43).

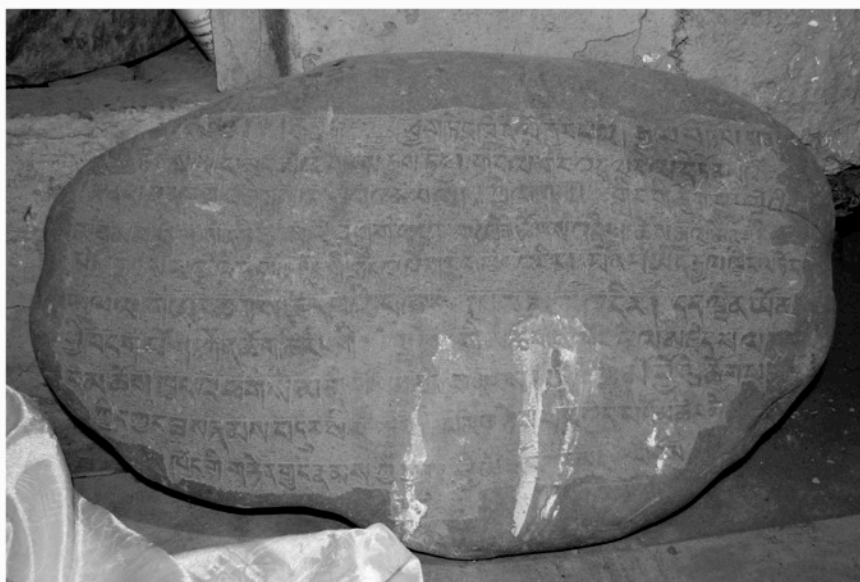


Figure 9 *Maṇi* stone inscription from Nadang. Photo: the author, 2016.

What happened to the three storey-building seen by Francke from a distance is not known. Today, the single-storey temple at Nadang has been heavily repaired with a completely new roof-framework (Fig. 10). There is yet very little left in situ that could suggest that the

original building was erected at the turn of the first millennium when Tabo was founded. Moreover, a cursory evaluation of the wall-paintings inside shows a clear leaning towards the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, it is not impossible that these murals date back to the time of the donor inscription, or perhaps a bit earlier, when Gelugpa institutions in West Tibet received substantial support from the rulers of Guge in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Regardless of the date of the building, the stone inscription from Nadang was somehow removed from its original context in order to be preserved inside the temple to which it refers. Once again, we are left with the impression that the donor inscriptions of these *mani* stones were read and deliberately saved for the information they contain.



Figure 10 One-storey temple at Nadang, back of the building. Photo: the author, 2016.

Discussion

By a fortunate concurrence of circumstances, stone inscriptions from Spiti have resurfaced at a time where the historical study of the Western Himalayan valley returns to the foreground. Thanks to the pioneering work of Shuttleworth, we are now able to lay the foundations for an epigraphic analysis of *mani* stones produced in the river valley. The inscriptions presented in this paper generally corroborate historical trends and observations made by early

scholars, such as Francke, Tucci, and Petech. As a tool for microhistory, on the other hand, these epigraphs bring first-hand evidence of social practices engaging local communities at different periods of time. This notwithstanding, the well-defined format of these inscriptions locates their production within the wider geopolitical context of Western Tibet.

Remarkably, the donor inscriptions inscribed on *maṇi* stones correspond to a model of written documents produced in Spiti, Zanskar, and Ladakh from at least the thirteenth century onwards. If these documents vary in length and material support, they often follow the same literary pattern using established phraseology and similar images to organise and adjust their content to regional particularism. Common to all these documents is the recording of meritorious deeds and patronage. Examples of donative records include the wall inscription at Wanla in Ladakh (Tropper 2006, 2015), the dedication poem from Lari in Spiti (Tauscher 1999), the donor chronicles from Zangla in Zanskar (Dargyay 1987), the register of Rangrik in Spiti (Scherrer-Schaub 2013), and numerous inscriptions from Ladakh (Jina 1998; Francke & Jina 2003). A review and discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of the present research. I will therefore confine myself to outline dominant traits and particular aspects found in these documents that are equally relevant for the study of inscriptions from Spiti.

In most cases, the structure of donative records starts with a religious opening in the form of a praise, invocation, or eulogy. It opens with the auspicious Sanskrit formula, *Ōṃ sva sti siddham*, whether in full or in part. The passage is addressed to various Buddhist entities, both animate and inanimate. It is almost invariably composed in verse, from a single to many stanzas in length, and ends with an expression of piety; typically 'I respectfully bow down to' (*la gus pas 'dud*) or 'I pay homage to' (*la phyag 'tshal lo*).

The following section sketches a cosmological representation featuring topoi like the southern continent Jambudvīpa and the seat of the Buddha's awakening (*vajrasana / rdo rje gdan*). From the holy land of India, the narration moves to Tibet, Mt. Kailash, and the dominion of Upper Ngari where the teaching of the Buddha spread. By the time it reached West Tibet, the description veers towards the Indus River and the realm of politics. This literary trope is conspicuous in most donative documents and was already noticed by Francke during his tour of Spiti. At Kaza, the German scholar noticed "a fairly old votive tablet dating from the time of the Ladakhi regime in Spiti". "It was written in bad orthography", remarked the ASI member, "and was in a poor state of preservation. The 'national anthem' was similar to that of Guge stones, but in the place where

the Guge version has the Satluj (*gLang-chen-kha-bab*), here we find the Indus (*Seng-ge-kha-bab*)" (Francke 1914 : 45).¹⁸

The so-called 'national anthem' identified by Francke is a recurring expression used in donative records from the Western Himalayas. A review of its occurrences, however, reveals diverging formulations that have occasionally misguided scholars in their translations. In its simplest form the expression bears the meaning of "to the right/left side of the Indus River". For instance, it is written "*seng ge kha 'bab 'brug pa'i g.yon phyogs su*" in the wall inscription at Wanla, leading Tropper to translate it as "on the (proper) left side of the thundering Indus river" (Tropper 2006 : 124). Here the rendering of *'brug pa'i* as 'thundering' seems a bit awkward and is at odds with classical Tibetan grammar. The same phrasing is equally found in the register from Rangrik. This time it is translated "to the right side of the streams of the Indus river", showing little concern for the use and possible meaning of *'brug pa'i* in the Tibetan original (Scherrer-Schaub 2013 : 129). The matter is further complicated in the epigraphs from Spiti in which geographical accuracy and spelling consistency were at the mercy of stone carvers. SI1 and SI2 closely follow the example given above, only this time to situate the village of Mani surprisingly to the right side of the Indus River.¹⁹ In SI4, however, the sentence reaches a high level of incorrect spelling and phonetic rendering, reading "*sin ti tsang po'i 'grug pa'i g.yon chogs 'dir*".

The matter can be easily resolved, it would seem, thanks to a relatively large corpus of inscriptions from Ladakh in which the expression 'to the right/left side of the Indus River' is written using three different forms: *'brug pa'i*, *'dug pa'i*, or *rgyug pa'i*.²⁰ In light of these inscriptions, it is reasonable to assume that the correct spelling and grammatical form should be the existential verb 'to exist' (*'dug*) or the verb 'to flow' (*rgyug*), whereas the single incidence of *'brug pa'i* in these inscriptions should likely be regarded as a corrupted form; perhaps induced by a vague homonymic relationship between these terms?

¹⁸ I am not familiar with any inscription bearing a reference to the Sutlej River, whereas mentions of the Indus River are plentiful.

¹⁹ That is "*seng ge kha 'bab 'brug pa'i g.yas phyogs na*" and "*sangge kha ba 'brug pi g.yes phyogs 'dir*" respectively.

²⁰ Jina's transliteration scheme is far from ideal and consistent. Following his transliterations of Tibetan originals, it appears that some of the words were originally misspelt, which should not come as a surprise in view of the nature of these inscriptions. Nonetheless, Jina's work allows the identification of **'brug pa'i* in SI.No.40 (Jina 1998 : 19). The form **'dug pa'i* is found in SI.No.38, SI.No.51, and possibly SI.No.92 (Francke & Jina 2003 : 44, 51, 92). Finally, the form **rgyug pa'i* is used in SI.No.2, SI.No.42 (Jina 1998 : 3, 21), and SI.No.78 (Francke & Jina 2003 : 96).

Regardless, the frequent literary reference to the Indus River in donative records is instrumental in revealing the realm of worldly power within this sacred Buddhist geography. Located to the right/left side of the flowing river stands the 'great' or 'divine' palace (*pho brang*), from where the ruling monarch exercises power over his western Himalayan dominions. Described as a religious king (*chos kyi rgyal po*), his mighty power is requested to be firmly established, following the proverbial expression 'May the helmet be high!' (*dbu rmog mtho gyur cig*). The identity of the current ruler is usually established, offering ground for dating these documents, and a royal genealogy may also be recounted and praised. At the end of this cosmological and territorial narrative comes the place of enunciation. It is the location where the wall inscription, the *maṇi* stone, or the manuscript is not only situated but from where it speaks.

Donative records are public, or semi-public, testimonies meant to be put on display and read. In some ways, these documents are able 'to speak' to the devotee and 'to apostrophize' the passers-by in order to draw attention to their content and message. The use of interjections is another structuring element in the composition of these records. The vocative expressions *kye lags*, *kye legs*, or simply *kye*, not only call out to bystanders, but also break down the documents into easily identifiable sections. The literary device is typically placed between the opening praise and the following cosmological narrative. At Wanla, for instance, the interjection *kjee legs* "does not seem to be part of the verse proper", remarks Tropper, "[it] rather appears to form a *caesura* separating the opening verse from the main body of the inscriptional text" (Tropper 2006 : 114 : 50). Similarly in the epigraph from Dangkhar (SI1), the interjection *kjee* is repeated thrice, marking important sections and parts of the donor inscription.

Recalling the situational character and functions of stone inscriptions, one is therefore inclined to think, like Ardussi, that *maṇi* walls operate as a communication medium within Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities. Within the framework of merit-making, these votive structures are primarily the repository of pious offerings in the form of carved *maṇi* stones. With their donor inscriptions placed at prominent positions, on the other hand, these walls become public message boards and territorial markers. By setting an example of Mahāyāna praxis, these epigraphs reiterate normative ethical behaviours and civic values. In this process, the current world order is reaffirmed by means of a territorial anthem headed by the tutelary *cakravartin*. All those subordinated to the ideal ruler, from local officials to the donors themselves, are therefore exhorted to emulate the monarch and rule ethically and benevolently

over his vassal territories and their communities. In view of our donor inscriptions, the *maṇi* walls of Spiti operated as semaphoric architectural features put to the service of a politico-religious ideology.

Overall, the main body of donative records praises donors, meritorious acts, and the motivations for performing them. Looking at donor chronicles (*chab brjod*) from Zanskar, Dargyay summarizes the underlying dynamic of merit-making, gift-giving, and patronage. "The motivation for such a deed", she explains, "is to dedicate the merit generated through this act to the benefit of the donor's deceased parents, in some cases to ensure the prosperity of the living (and ruling) members of the family, to purge one's own wrong deed, and in general to the benefit of all sentient beings" (Dargyay 1987 : 16).

As we have seen, the donor inscriptions from Spiti often involved a main donor and the participation of supplementary benefactors. From the gift of a single stone to the establishment of an entire *maṇi* wall, it is not clear how the making of *maṇi* stones could impact the economy and benefit local communities beyond their religious value. In fact, assessing the production cost of *maṇi* stones in Spiti is a complex task considering that the economic system of these regions relied essentially on barter. Based on the data provided by these inscriptions, it is interesting to observe the following ratio. In SI3, an anonymous donor offered a single stone to alleviate the suffering of an individual. At Dangkhar, a minister had two hundred *maṇi* stones made to ensure the prosperity of the state (SI1), while the Lady from Lower Mani donated one hundred stones for a member of the (local) nobility and her parents (SI2). Finally, the main donor of Nadang bestowed one thousand *maṇi* stones towards the improvement of the local temple, with the possible assistance of a lord and other benefactors. One is therefore tempted to think that the making of a few hundred *maṇi* stones was a somewhat average donation for the wealthy upper classes of Spiti. Ordinary men and women, on the other hand, could probably not afford to offer more than a couple of carved mantras; and their gesture did not necessarily result in the creation of a donor inscription. As we have seen, the commissioning of *maṇi* stones could yet amount to a fully-fledged wall of one thousand stones. A similar donation was also reported at Nako in Upper Kinnaur (Tropper 2009). Here, again, the donor is found among the uppermost section of the society in which his family lineage and ancestry are heavily stressed.

Donative records also draw attention to the fundamental role performed by *donatrices* in Western Himalayan societies. Although they tend to appear as supplementary donors, women figure prominently in several documents. In effect, meritorious acts

dedicated to entire communities often include the contribution of Lady donors (*yon gyi bdag mo*), spouses, and sisters. The dedication poem from Lari in Spiti, for instance, details the assistance offered by two pairs of sisters in attending a monastic community (Tauscher 1999). Following the traditional expression observed in SI1 and SI4, the sisters from Lari delighted their countrymen by transforming food into nectar, and by serving it to the monks with their graceful hands (*lag bde*). These *donatrices* are designated by their full name and, like the male donors to whom they tend to be associated, likely belong to the local nobility. As such, the study of epigraphy gives women a visibility often compromised in other literary forms.

Maṇi walls are ubiquitous features in the rich material and visual culture of Tibetan-speaking regions. The interest of these multifunctional monuments for the study of social history, however, has received little attention in academic circles. In particular, the analysis of donor inscriptions engraved on *maṇi* stones provides valuable information to apprehend the social actors of communities, who, more often than not, 'escaped the historian's net'. With the four inscriptions presented here, we are also reminded of the complex political situation experienced by Spiti, a mountainous landlocked river valley wedged between powerful Buddhist kingdoms, in the course of its history. Composed according to well-established literary patterns, these epigraphs imitate, in many ways, other written documents produced to record the common memory of individuals and communities engaged in gift-giving and merit-making. As such, donor inscriptions were engraved in stone in order to last. The content of these inscriptions was made public and, therefore, accessible to all. It ensured the safekeeping of a collective memory and the diffusion of normative Buddhist beliefs from one generation to the following.

Epilogue

In the 1930s, the ability of stone inscriptions to operate as a means of mass communication did not escape the attention of missionaries engaged in the religious conversion of Western Himalayan populations. Drawing from Francke's experience, members of the Moravian church used stone carving as a medium for the dissemination of Christ's message (Fig.11). "During a missionary journey to Spiti", remarks Rafal Beszterda, "they hired a stonemason to inscribe verses taken mainly from the Gospel of Mark in classical Tibetan on the rocks and stones along the way. In this way, the Moravians utilised a regional tradition of inscribing religious

(Buddhist) texts in stone. They continued to use this technique until the 1950s. When the mission in Keylong closed, the Moravian bishop F.E. Peter stated that in the future, these stone carvings would be left to provide testimony to the Saviour and the missions once in the area" (Beszterda 2013 : 96-97). But as Buddhist *mani* stones or Christian evangelical engravings, the study of stone inscriptions offers a vibrant testimony to lesser known aspects of Tibetan and Himalayan history.



Figure 11 Christian evangelical text engraved on a stone somewhere near the Baralacha Pass (Unitätsarchiv der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität, Herrnhut, Germany). Photo: courtesy of Rafal Beszterda 2010

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APPENDIX

Stone Inscription from Dangkhar (SI1)

༄༄། ། ཨོ་བདེ་ལེགས་སུ་གྱུར་ཅིག། ཡུག་སྟོང་འཁོར་ལོ་སྐྱུར་བའི་རྒྱལ་པོ་སྟོང་། སྐུན་སྟོང་སྐལ་བ་བཟང་པོའི་
 སངས་རྒྱལ་སྟོང་། གང་ལ་གང་སྟོན་དེ་ལ་དེ་སྟོན་བའི་བུའོ་བ་སྐུན་རས་གཟིགས་ལ་ཡུག་འཚལ་ལོ། གྲི། སེང་
 བོ་ཁ་འབབ་འབྲུག་བའི་གཡས་ཕོགས་ན་ ས་འབྲུང་དུ་མོན་བའི་མེ་ཆེན་དབལ་ཁང་ཅེར་ ཚོས་རྒྱལ་སེང་བོ་རྣམ་
 རྒྱལ་ལྷ་སྟོན་མཚོ་གྱུར་ཅིག། གྲི། །དེ་ཡི་ཆབ་སྲིད་སྲི་ཉི་གང་ཁང་ཅེར་ ག་ག་ཆེ་རིང་རྣམས་རྒྱལ་སྐུ་ཆེ་སྐུན་གྱུར་
 ཅིག། གྲི། །ཡལ་མེས་ཁང་ཚུན་བར་ཅ་སྟོན་གྱི་རྒྱུད། ཡོན་གྱི་བདག་པོ་སྟོན་པོ་ཆེ་རིང་བའི་ས་གྲིས་རྒྱལ་སྟོན་
 རྣམས་གྱི་ལྷ་སྟོན་མོ་ཕྱིར་དུ། སུང་ཚོག་ཡི་བོ་དུག་མ་ཉེས་རྒྱ་བརྒྱུད་ས་གས་བའི་དོན་ཅན་མཚན་བཞེད་ལ་ཁོང་ལ་སྟོང་།
 རུང་རྒྱུད་ཅི་མེད་འོད་སལ་ལྷ་ནས་ཆད་ཡོན་གྱི་བདག་པོ་ཚོ་ཅོ་འཛོམས་ལགས་གྱིས། མི་ཟས་ལ་ལྷ་ཡི་བདུན་ཅེར་
 སྐྱུར། མཚོད་གནས་གཉེས་བར་བྱེད་བ་ཨ་མ་ཏོ།

// Ōṃ bde legs su gyur cig / phyag stong 'khor [los] sgyur ba'i rgyal
 po stong / spyang stong skal pa bzang po'i sangs rgyas stong / gang
 la gang [dul] de la de[r] ston pa'i / btsun [pa] spyang ras gzigs la
 phyag 'tshal lo / kyee / seng ge kha 'bab [rgy]ug pa'i g.yas phyogs

na [/] sa 'bur du thon pa'i ble chen dpal [m]kha[r] rtser [/] chos rgyal
 seng ge rnam rgyal [dbu] [r]mog mtho gyur cig / kyee / de yi chab
 srid spi ti grang khar rtser [/] ga ga tshe ring rna[m] rgyal sku tshe
 [brtan] gyur gig / kyee / yab mes khung [b]tsun par ca blon gyi
 rgyud / yon gyi bdag po blon po tshe ring bkris kyis rgyal blon rnam
 kyi [dbu] [r]mog mtho] phyir du / [g]sung [m]chog yi ge drug ma
 nyis [b]rgya [rdzogs] [b]sags pa'i don [ch]en mdzad pa khong la
 [b]stod / [gd]ung rgyud dri med 'od [g]sal lha nas [mche]d yon gyi
 bdag mo jo co 'dzoms lags kyis / mi zas la lha yi bdu[d] rtsir sbyar /
 mchod gnas [m]nyes par byed pa [E] ma ho

Stone Inscription from Lower Mani (SI2)

༄༅། །། ཨོྲ་སི་ལྷི།། བདེ་ལཱ་སུ་གུར་གཅིག་སྐྱ སྐྱ་སྐྱོན་དུ་གུར་བི་སྐྱོན་བ་སངས་རྒྱས་དང་བདེ་སྐྱོད་སྤྱི་གི་
 ལྷུག་བི་དྲི་ཚོས་དང་ལྷ་བ་སྤྱི་གི་ལྷུག་བི་དྲི་ཚོས་དང་། ལྷུབ་གནས་དགོན་མཚོག་སྤྱི་ལ་གྲུས་ཕུག་འཚེལ། གྲེ་ལཱ་
 ལྷིང་དེ་ཕྱོག་གུར་སྐོ་འཛི་འབྲུ་ལྷིང་ དབྲ་བཅོམ་བཞུར་གནས་སྤྱིག་སི་གངས་གི་འགྲུལ། མ་མོ་བཞུགས་ནས་མ་
 བང་དབྲུའི་མཚོ་ སརྟེ་ཁ་བ་འབྲུག་བི་གཡེས་ཕྱོར་འདྲིར་ ཡུལ་ལ་གཡེར་ཕྱར་སྤྱིད་པའི་མ་ནས་འདྲིར། ཚོས་རྒྱལ་
 ཚེན་པོ་ཉི་ཉི་རྒྱལ་གི་སྐྱ་ཚེ་སྐྱན་ཅིང་ཕུབ་སྤིད་རྒྱས་གུར་གཅིག་ ཡོན་གི་བདག་མོ་སྐོལ་མ་སྐྱབས་གིས། མགོ་འབྲེན་
 དཔོན་པོའི་སྐྱ་ཚེ་སྐྱན་ཕྱིར་དང་ དེན་ཚེན་མ་མི་ཐར་ལོམ་སྐོད་ཕྱིར་དུ་ མ་འགྲུར་བརྗོལ་མ་ཁེ་རྒྱ་ཅ་གཅིག་སྐྱངས་
 བགྲེས་ ཕྱི་འི་དབྲ་འདུལ་ རང་གི་སྐྱོན་སྐོ་སྐོངས་

// Ōṃ [swa] sti // bde l[e]gs su gyur gcig [/] sku [g]su(m) [mng]lon
 du gyur pa('i) ston pa sangs rgyas dang [/] [s]de snod [g]su(m) kyi
 phyag pa('i) da(m) chos dang [bslab] pa [g]su(m) kyi phyug pa('i)
 da(m) chos dang / skyab[s] gnas dkon mchog [g]su(m) la gus phyag
 'tshal / kye la(gs) gling [']di [mchog] gyur l[h]o [y]i 'dza(m) [b]u
 gling [/] dgra bcom gzhu(gs) gnas [ti] si gangs kyi [m]gul [/] ma
 [d]ro bzhugs [g]nas ma [pham] [g.y]u [y]i mtsho [/] s[e]ng ge kha
 ['bab] [rgy]ug pa'i g.yas phyo(gs) 'dir [/] yul la [y]ar phy(ogs) skyid
 pa'i ma nas 'dir / chos rgyal chen po nyi [ma] [r]na(m) rgyal [g]yi
 sku tshe [br]tan [zh]ing [ch]lab srid rgyas gyur gcig / yon [g]yi bdag
 mo sgrol ma skyabs kyis / mgo 'd]ren dpon po'i sku tshe [br]tan
 phyir dang [/] drin chen pa m[a] thar la(m) [']gro] phyir du [/] m[i]
 'gyur [r]do la ma Ni [b]rgya [r]tsa gcig sbyangs (bkra shis) [/] phyi
 [y]i dgra 'dul nang gi [g]nyen [r]na(m)[s] skyongs [/]

Stone Inscription from Mani (SI3)

༡༣༧ ། ཨོ་སྲ་སྒྲི་སི་རྒྱ་སྐྱ་སུམ་སྡོན་དུ་གྱུར་བའི་སྡོན་པ་སངས་རྒྱལ་དང་འཕགས་པ་སྐུན་རེས་གཟིགས་ལོ། ལྷག་
འཚལ་ལོ། གྲེ་ལགས། དད་ལྷན་ཡོན་བཟླ་བདག་པོ། དག་སྦྱོར་ནས་མཁའ་རྒྱལ་ཚེ་འི་ཚེ་འདི་འགལ་སྐྱེན་བར་ཆད་
ཞེས་བ་དད་ཕྱི་མ་བདེ་བ་ཅན་དུ་སྐྱེ་བར་འོག།

// Ōṃ swa s[t]i siddha(m) [/] sku [g]sum [mngon] du gyur pa'i ston
pa sangs rgyas dang 'phags pa spyang res gzigs la phyag 'tshal lo /
kye lags / dad ldan yon [gyi] bdag po dge slong nam mka' rgy[a]
[m]tsho [yi] [/] tshe 'di 'gal [rkyen] bar chad [zhi ba] dang [/] phyi
ma bde ba can du skye bar shog /

Stone Inscription from Nadang (SI4)

༡ ། ལྷག་ཏོང་ཁོར་ལོ་རྒྱུར་བའི། རྒྱལ་པོ་ཏོང་། སྐུན་
༢ ། ཏོང་སྐྱལ་བཟང་བའི་སངས་རྒྱལ་ཏོང་། གང་ལ་གང་འདྲ་ལ་དེ་ལ་དེ་ཏོན་བའི་
༣ ། རྩན་བ་སྐུན་འགྲེ་བཟེགས་ལ་ལྷག་འཚལ་ལོ། གྲེ་ལགས། མྱིང་གི་ཚོགས་རྒྱུར་ལྗོངས་
༤ ། མཐམ་བུ་མྱིང་། སིན་ཏི་ཅངས་པོ་འགྲུག་བའི། གཡོན་ཚོགས་འདིར། ཚོས་རྒྱལ་ཚེན་
༥ ། ཁྱི་གྲགས་པ་ལྗེ་ལ་ཏོང། ཁོང་གི་བངའ་འོག་དང་ཁར་འདིར། རོན་པོ་ཡིད་རྒྱལ་ཁོང་ལ་ཏོང་
༦ ། ལུལ་ལ་གཡང་ཆགས་གྲིད་བའི་བཞུར་ལུལ་ན་དང་འདིར། དད་ལྷན་ཡོན་
༧ ། གྲེ་བདག་པོ། ཀོན་ཚོག་ཚེ་རིག་གི། ལྷ་ཁང་གི་མཚོགས་གོང་མེལ་མཛད་པ་ལ་
༨ ། དམ་ཚོས་བྱུང་འཕགས་མ་ནི་སྦོང་མཚར་བཞུར་ལ། ཡོན་གྲེ་བདག་པོ་བྱི་ཚོ་ཚོག་པ་
༩ ། གྲིད་ཀྱང་ཟས་རྣམས་བདུར་སིང་རྒྱུར། རོན་གཉིས་བར་གྲེད་པ་ངོ་མཚར་ཚེ་
༡༠ ། ཁོང་གི་གཉེན་གྲུང་རྣམས་ཀྱི་ཀྱང་། ཕྱི་མི་ཚོང་གྲུང་མཚན་བ་ངོས་
༡༡ ། མཚར་ཚེ་

1 // phyag [s]tong [']khor lo[s] [s]gyur [b]a'i [/] rgyal po [s]tong /
spyang
2 [s]tong skal bzang pa'i sangs rgyas [s]tong / gang la gang ['dul]
de la de[r] [s]ton pa'i
3 [bts]un pa spyang [ras] [g]zigs la phyag 'tshal lo / kye lags / gling
gi [m]chog gyur lho'i
4 ['dz]am bu [g]ling / sin ti [gtsang] po [rgy]ug pa'i [/] g.yon
[phy]ogs 'dir / chos rgyal chen
5 khri grags pa lde la [bstod] / khong gi [m]nga' 'og drang khar 'dir
/ [d]pon po yid rgyal khong la [bstod]

- 6 yul la g.yang chags [s]kyid pa'i bzhur yul na dang 'dir / dad ldan
yon
- 7 gyi bdag po / [d]kon [m]chog tshe ri[n]g gi[s] / lha khang gi
[tsh]ogs gong [']phel mdzad pa la
- 8 dam chos khyad 'phags ma Ni stong [rtsa] bzh[e]ngs / yon gyi
bdag mo [j]o co chog pa
- 9 [gis] kyang zas rnam [bdud] [rtsir] [s]gyur / [d]pon gnyis par
byed pa ngo mtshar che
- 10 khong gi gnyen [grogs] rnam kyi[s] kyang / phyi mi zong [bsk]ur
mdzad pa ng[o]
- 11 mtshar che [//]

