Antecedents of Bon
On rMa Folks and the Origins of gShen Ritual Specialists

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Introduction, The Lay of the (Holy) Land

There is no or desperately little reliable early evidence to support the historicity of the grand pre-Buddhist Bon Zhang zhung Empire of later Bon po sources and their western aficionados. Imagination is nonetheless plentiful. In the PIATS 2016,[1] I discuss the oldest historical textual sources relevant to a heartland of Bon, which is variously conceptualised as Zhang zhung, Ta zig and 'Ol mo lung ring, with special reference to a central stronghold and main seat of power in Zhang zhung: the so-called Silver Castle of Garuḍa Valley or Khyung lung dNgul mkhar.[2]

If one carefully examines the genealogy of knowledge and the history of invention of that grand Zhang zhung Bon Empire and its legendary Khyung lung castle, one cannot help but notice that our ideas about them derive from surprisingly late discourse, which postdates any relevant historical and geographical realities by a long stretch. The later Bon Zhang zhung literary construct is to be distinguished clearly from a probably historical and probably also small principality by the name of Zhang zhung that is located west of Central Tibet, roughly centred on the Kailash area and that seems to

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[1] Proceedings of the IATS 2006: Blezer (2011), *Creation of a Myth*, henceforth "PIATS 2006" will be used.

[2] If we follow the spelling commonly used in later sources, the name of that castle is to be translated as: The Silver Castle of Garuḍa Valley. The earliest references to a castle by that name suggest that the name originally might have been a more prosaically descriptive *rdul mkhar* (which in written form is very similar to the old alternative spelling *rngul mkhar* and which is indeed attested in sources): a dusty or sandy castle. Such a description incidentally matches the earliest descriptions of such a castle in Dunhuang sources remarkably well. There is a good likelihood that the more lofty Silver or dNgul reading is a later literary embellishment that occurred when the narrative of a Bon Khyung lung castle started to take off and grow (Blezer 2011, *Creation of a Myth*).

have had a northern extension as well. But, interestingly, that historical Zhang zhung in its descriptions carries no significant Bon po associations and in time also significantly precedes Bon traditions as we know them now.

While, as professed many times before, it is obviously self-defeating to try to *prove* that the proverbial pink elephant—*casu quo* the grand pre-Buddhist Bon Zhang zhung Empire—never existed *because* it is not mentioned in early sources, there still is something more than just a *lack* of evidence to go by. Structural analyses of the earliest narratives on Bon origins reveal that those stories about Bon origins have datable origins themselves: the idea of an old Bon Zhang zhung Empire has left traces in history, none of which, however, predate the turn of the first millennium AD. In fact, not a single, major, self-consciously Bon narrative can be dated before the 10th–11th century AD—and that is a rather generous assessment! All stories converge at the turn of the first millennium: the period of the early second diffusion of Buddhism or *phyi dar*. Individual story elements may be earlier, however.

Considering the relative success of Buddhist interest groups in the period, it should be obvious indeed what triggered Bon identity discourse. That fact alone already makes it unlikely that a grand Zhang zhung Empire would have existed before the turn of the first millennium AD; as far as our records go, the great Empire then simply had not yet been invented. There is not a single shred of evidence that anybody in Tibet had thought of such a grander Zhang zhung *before* the early *phyi dar*. Again, we are not talking about that probably minor, historical Zhang zhung principality to the west of central Tibet. The conception of a larger Zhang zhung in textual sources in fact even postdates the first traces of the formation of a Bon identity (PIATS 2006). Outlining how the memory of the old Zhang zhung principality was recycled into a grand, vast and near-invincible Bon Zhang zhung Empire is for another occasion.[3]

Except for a brief introduction of the problem, I also leave for later discussion those typically vague and often contradictory (Chinese) categories for peoples at their (Tibetan) borders, such as references to Yang-t'ung or Yangtong (*yángtòng* 羊同), that some have presumed is a name for Zhang zhung borrowed into Chinese via Persian, or the Ch'iang or Qiang (*qiāngzú* 羌族) peoples, for that matter, that, over time, have identified with very different ethnic groups.

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[3]   It is unavoidable that there will be overlap, mostly in paraphrase, with earlier publications when presenting this unpublished prong of a two-pronged argument; this paper will focus less on locations and more on 'people'.

The earliest Tibetan documents do not at all recommend visualising a 'territorial' extension (however constituted) of Zhang zhung that was any more extensive than for many of the other minor principalities mentioned (see, e.g., various Dunhuang 'Catalogues', discussed by Lalou, Macdonald, Stein and others). Most publications on the topic hail from a period and follow scholarly sensibilities that tended to rely on late Tibetan historical (re)constructions. The most compelling evidence for this vast Zhang zhung in fact (and quite tellingly) comes from *non-Tibetan* sources, i.e., references in Chinese sources to Greater Yang-t'ung (Ta Yang-t'ung, *dàyángtòng* 大羊同) and Lesser Yang-t'ung (Hsiao Yang-t'ung, *xiǎoyángtòng* 小羊同). In fact, most western-language arguments for the existence of a larger Zhang zhung are based on references to Yang-t'ung in Chinese sources, if not on much later Bon po discourse.[4]

But as is well known, Chinese sources are notoriously vague about the barbarians at their borders (a bit like references to various groups styled *barbaros* and *celtoi* by the ancient Greeks). The list of all the groups labeled 'Qiang' is long. One might dig further into the semantics of Yangtong—or, as the older literature usually has it in Wade-Giles, Yang-t'ung—and see what comes up. It may be a generic reference to various groups in Tibet that spelled the same sort of trouble for the Chinese. In any case, the exact extent and even location, particularly of Greater Yang-t'ung is utterly confused in Chinese sources, locations ranging from the far north-west to the north-east. The identification of Yang t'ung with Zhang zhung at this point is an interesting hypothesis at best (and a rather problematic and tenuous one).

Typically, it are scholars who already start from the assumption that there should be a grand Zhang zhung empire out there, somewhere, who eagerly latch onto Yang t'ung. If one doesn't start from that assumption, it all of a sudden starts to look much less convincing, and if you try to do the math for the argument for a vast Zhang zhung, purely based on primary sources, and leave all the intuitions and later historical constructions for what they are, a nice surprise lies waiting: there is really not much evidence to go by, particularly on the Tibetan side of things.

Like the ancient Chinese and so many other cultures, in our *ad hoc* labels for 'others' we tend to think in conveniently abbreviated dichotomies. Bon becomes things non-Buddhist in Tibet (besides other major world religions, of course) and Zhang zhung is everything non-Yar lung, everything non-sPu rgyal Bod etc., and

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[4]   For a brief *résumé* of the proposition (and interesting linguistic arguments), see references in Beckwith (2011).

therefore at one time must have covered most, if not all, of ethnic Tibet, with the exception of central Tibet (and other well-known entities). So-called intuition more often than not leads us right into the trappings of oversimplified categorisations. Yang-t'ung looks like a Chinese exonym for diffuse groups in western and north-western —but, oddly enough, also in north-eastern— areas of 'ethnic Tibet', a pragmatic classification of groups and alliances that spelled the same mix of trouble and opportunities for 'Chinese' wheeling and dealing at their western borders. It is not a category of the same order as the Zhang zhung of Dunhuang sources or the Bon Zhang zhung myth.[5]

The construction of sacred landscape is of all ages; the Bon po-s are no exception. As an example of a surprisingly recent construction (or rather identification), elsewhere[6] I have argued that the main identifications of those Khyung lung 'Silver Castle' sites (the alleged seat of power of that grand Bon 'Zhang zhung Empire') that presently are still up for discussion—to wit, competing locations in Khyung lung yul smad and Gur gyam—seem to be much more recent than has hitherto been assumed (mid-19th century AD, to be precise). In general, the Gur gyam site identifications seem to be best supported, albeit only from relatively late Tibetan sources. Presently, most specialists indeed seem to favour the Gur gyam sites. In PIATS 2006, I show that the earliest Tibetan sources on the other hand—and now I mean those sources that are closest to the presumed Zhang zhung period—suggest different locations for the legendary castle, (much) further east—perhaps not even too far removed from rKong po—in any case locations that clearly are incompatible with the currently designated and narrativised sites.

The identification of alternative sites for the castle, other than those presently favoured by archaeologists and intrepid explorers, and based on the oldest extant sources is an involved matter (because the earliest source that is sufficiently elaborate already appears narrativised to a significant degree and the castle appears there as a trope-like entity). Presently, we will mainly be concerned with uncovering the most ancient literary traces, if not of a heartland of Bon as such then at least of narratives that gave rise to the idea of a Bon heartland. This brings us back to the earliest non-Buddhist narratives in Dunhuang sources.

A fundamental problem in the study of emerging Bon is the paradox of Bon historiography; most quests for the antecedents of Bon have been hampered by a lack of genuinely early textual sources

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5 See now also Blezer (2019), *How Zhang zhung Emerges in Emic and Etic Discourse and is Ever at Peril of Disappearing Again in the Same.*
6 Blezer (2007), *Heaven my Blanket, Earth my Pillow* and (2008), *The Silver Castle Revisited.*

that can safely be dated to before the tenth century AD, or at least to sometime deeper into the first millennium. So far, we have not been able to gain any firm historical footing in the period before the early *phyi dar*. The major clearly non-Buddhist (but not explicitly Bon) textual sources that are relevant to Bon and that may cover the last part of the first millennium are found among Tibetan-language Dunhuang sources. Informed opinion about their antiquity varies (compare e.g. the dating of McDonald, Stein, and Beckwith, and see also Dalton, Davis and van Schaik 2007). If no convincing additional palaeographical or historical evidence emerges, I think it would be wise to remain conservative and presume that most of the Tibetan-language Dunhuang documents were composed close to (that is within one or perhaps two centuries from) the upper limit for the sealing of the cave, approximately in the beginning of the 11th century AD.[7] The structural analysis of narratives contained in these Dunhuang documents that I develop here, may, for the first time, provide a historically reliable lens into that presumed period of Bon antecedents—however narrow, aspheric, and fogged that lens may be. The image that appears is nonetheless revealing, and moreover receives confirmation from the earliest self-consciously Bon sources, which have hitherto been ignored. These sources do not sit well with later, polished origin narratives of Bon: the grand Come-from-the-west narrative that invokes Zhang zhung, 'Ol mo lung ring, and Ta zig is conspicuously absent.

In the following, we will examine the earliest evidence for a 'location' of the origin of Bon, or at least for the origin of its narratives. We find those in non-Buddhist *ritualistic* narratives of the Dunhuang period. For an overview and analysis of Dunhuang *historical* narratives, I refer to PIATS 2006 (but see also Macdonald 1971). The analysis of ritualistic narratives is significantly more involved than that of historical sources. It requires fragile attempts at connecting clusters of narrative elements that in Dunhuang sources appear loosely assembled around important names and locations to the earliest, self-consciously Bon sources, such as the *mDo 'dus*, the *Klu 'bum* and other sources, with special attention to those names and locations, of course, that are already familiar from later strata of emerging Bon. The latter begin to emerge in around the 10th–11th century AD and thus may be closely contiguous with the redaction of

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[7]   Presumably 1002 AD (Rong 1999); see Blezer (2011, p.168, n.3), *It All Happened in Myi yul skyi mthing*; see the prologue on Old Tibetan in Walter (2009). Often closure in 1034/35 AD is mentioned (cf. Tangut attack, probably in 1036 AD). But cf. Rong (1999), Russell-Smith (2005:72ff) and Imaeda (2008): 1002 AD or 1006 AD (Dohi)."

Dunhuang materials. The nature of the rituals cannot be elucidated here, for reasons of space.[8]

A clear example for this I have discussed elsewhere.[9] There I summarily connected the story of the alleged founder of Bon, sTon pa gShen rab mi bo, as it starts to appear in texts like the *mDo 'dus* and the *Klu 'bum*, to occurrences of the descriptive nomer Pha gShen rab(s) (kyi) myi bo and to names of other famous *bon* and *gshen* ritual specialists in Dunhuang sources.

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rMa Folks and Skyi Places
Possible Antecedents of Bon po, gShen and Zhang zhung

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As argued before (e.g., PIATS 2006), two prominent early (clusters of) names need to be examined: *rma* and *skyi*. Both show clear narrative association with *bon* and *gshen* types of ritual specialists and with a heartland for those types. By simply tracing two syllables and their narrative environments in ritualistic Dunhuang sources, perhaps for the first time in Bon studies, we are able to put a tentative foot down in a period before the 10th–11th century AD. Preliminary findings on the *skyi* cluster have already been published,[10] the findings on the rMa cluster of names not in its entirety. It is my pleasure and great honour to offer these tentative reflections in honour of the finest imaginable Tibetan Studies colleague, Daniel Preston Martin, who incidentally was substantially involved in the research (program) underlying this paper.[11]

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rMa, sMa, sMra & Myi; rMa da (na), Myi bo & sMra bon
and Dur gshen & gShen rab(s)

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This investigation starts from rather small and unseemly beginnings: two Tibetan syllables: *rma* and *skyi*. The first comprehends a couple of obscure but apparently related names in old Tibetan documents: *rma*, *sma*, and *smra*. They often occur in Dunhuang and other early sources

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and seem part of descriptive names; they look like toponyms[12] or may derive from those.

Thomas (1957:7&53) in IOL734 (Text IV) associates the *rma* name with the rMa chu or upper Huangho (river) area.[13] Based on association with *rma bya*, he takes it to mean "peacock". Leaving etymology aside for a moment, it indeed makes sense to connect the profusion of *rma*, *sma* and *smra* names in Dunhuang narratives to origins in the nearby rMa river or valley area (to wit, rMa chu and rMa rong). Thomas (1957) argues, quite plausibly, that many names and narratives that have been preserved in Dunhuang documents derive from near-local traditions of this remote north-eastern quarter of Tibet. Likewise, one would obviously like to connect names that contain the toponym rTsang to the rTsang po river area. But it would be imprudent to assume, as Thomas seems to, that texts containing references that can be traced to those north-eastern areas, originally, do also entirely, or substantially 'belong' there. Thomas does allow for adaptation of stories through collection, translation and the like, but he neglects to take into account that names and narremes of local narratives may also become part of a repertoire that is performed more widely and thus migrate to other narrative contexts, which perhaps also pertain to other areas, or may be included in stories for reasons other than geographical or genealogical accuracy—e.g., because of similarities in name, theme or ritual performance. Elsewhere, I considered an example for the narrative concentration of two sKyi realms, including their associated clusters of narrative elements, which also involve those *rma/smra* type names (and incidentally also elaborated on the *smra* and *smrang* nexus).[14]

The syllable *rma* also has become productive in ways other than merely being a place name. Its obvious geographical origins notwithstanding, *rma* often appears as a name and toponym for people. Based on IOL734 and a few other old sources, one may argue that

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[12] For a few useful references in later sources see Haarh (1969), who refers to dPa' bo Gtsug lag 'phreng ba (on pp.105 and 175) and to the *rGyal po bka'i thang yig* (on pp.100, 120 and 123).

[13] See old literature on expeditions and travel in the rMa chu area by Filchner (1907), Tafel (1914)—Filchner was present in the Tafel expedition as a medical officer; and, older still, Prschewalski (1884). See also more recent literature on the area, such as Andreas Gruschke (2001).

[14] Blezer (2012), *It All Happened in Myi yul skyi mthing* ("sMra myi are 'human folk' from the human (*myi*, *rma* or *smra*) world: sMra yul or Myi yul. They may, at some point, have been perceived as mythic early Tibetans, perhaps a generic self-reference for people who know how to speak [*smra*] and how to perform ritual recitation, *smrang*, properly"). Lalou (1958:159) has forwarded a very different proposal for contextualising the *smra, rma*, and *sma* group of names. She considers them variants of Zhang zhung Mar or sMar, thus suggesting they are toponyms pertaining to an area bordering both rTsang and Zhang zhung.

rma, *smra* and *sma* are synonymous with *myi*, "man". This possibility was first suggested by Stein,[15] mainly in brief notes (as so many of his brilliant ideas in fact are).[16] As we shall see, this reading may directly affect the earliest formations of the legend of the founder of Bon. Developing Stein's argument further, we will speculate that rMa bu is equivalent to Myi (bo) bu and sMra yul to Myi yul, and even more exciting: that the *gshen* called *rma dad* and the *gshen* called *myi bo (dad?)* originally were similar or perhaps even identical, though distinct narrative entities.[17]

To start with the latter: these two strands of descriptive nomers of famous gShen, for example in IOL 731:124, appear as: *pha gshen rabs myi bo dad* [*dang?*] *dur gshen ma dad*: *pha gshen rab(s) (kyi) myi bo (dad* or *dang,* but probably the latter; cf. *rma dad)* and *pha/pa dur gshen (gyi) rma dad* (cf. *myi bo (dad))*.

The joint appearances of those two great *gshen* in PT1068, PT1134, PT1194, and IOL731 may be the result of a conflation of two originally separate strands of narratives regarding closely related categories of senior (*pha*) ritual specialists that were differentially appropriated by later narrative discourse. Pha gShen rab(s) kyi myi bo and Pha Dur gshen gyi rma dad/da (na) may be characters that originally pertained to similar or even the same narrative configurations. With the wisdom of hindsight, we now know that the gShen rab(s) myi bo figure was 'elected' for a more ambitious narrative career and his descriptive nomer may originally also have been personalised somewhat more explicitly. Note that these are *the* two personalised *gshen* names that are mentioned most frequently in these Dunhuang sources on healing and death ritual. The Dur gshen type—*(')dur* refers to tombs and funerary rites after all—contrary to later usage and for quite obvious reasons, even occurs slightly more frequently in those old ritualistic sources than does the gShen rab(s) type.

PT1136 and a few other Dunhuang sources are very significant for our understanding of the development of gShen rab(s) and its narrative environment, including visualisations of a heartland of Bon. In the second part of PT1136, for example, we find a 'healing/funeral' narrative in which a lord from rTsang (chen), Jo bo rTsang Ho de'i hos bdag and his son sMa/rMa bu (zing ba'i zing skyes) are involved in providing proper ritual service for their

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15   Stein (1988:48) and (1971:488 and n.26).

16   Thomas (1957:53) speculates that *rma* in names such as *rma hi*, *rma bo* and *rma mching* in Chinese was rendered by *mi* (*mitsi, mibo, michen,* successively). The IOL734 (Pu) rMa bo in Chinese would thus be rendered *mi bo*.

17   So much also seems to be suggested by the *Mu cho'i khrom 'dur*, p.243, l.2f.

unfortunate daughter and sister.[18] The confusion that meets us between (Myi) sMa bu/sMra bon, the ordinary 'lay' figure and son on the one hand (cf. also the rather frequent use of sMra myi), and the occasional reference to a more priestly sounding sMra bon on the other,[19] may point to the earliest narrative origins and development of the type of senior (pha/pa/yab) *gshen* styled *rma da (na)* or *rma dad* (who perhaps is equivalent to *myi bo* [*dad*]).

If we then add up one plus one, the Hos bdag and his wife, gShen za'i gyi myed ma (gShen za clearly indicates the lady of gShen affiliation), are perhaps the closest match we may ever hope to find for a 'father & mother' associated with 'personal' origins (in a narrative) for a rMa da (or Myi bo) type of senior *gshen* priest. I leave aside for a moment the question whether the later sTon pa gShen rab character derives from a generic designation for a type of ritual specialist or eventually goes back to the name of a historical person that triggered a story tradition. I thus also leave aside the possibility, or likelihood, that historical-looking, important names that are mentioned in these *rabs*- and *smrang*-type of Dunhuang ritual narratives may sometimes meet us as heavily narrativised legendary or even mythicised entities, the historical origins of which (if there ever were any) may occasionally hearken back several centuries. In any case, they most likely are irrelevant to g-Yung drung Bon that, at the beginning of the second millennium, recycled some of these entities into new narrative contexts. Thomas seems to have taken the historicity of these names and references at face value. I think we should first try to understand the configuration and history of these Dunhuang ritualistic narratives better, before jumping to any conclusions based on names alone.

In the narrative construct that meets us in PT1136, the gShen rab(s) (kyi) myi bo figure seems to appear in more than one role, in one and the same story. The figure that is actually named gShen rab(s) here acts in a supervising and advisory role, without getting his hands dirty. He shows himself as a typical late, Dunhuang-period form of a generic, senior, supervising officiant. But here he is, in a sense, portrayed as helping his own former self, for, as we saw above, in this story he assists narrative relics of his possibly earliest origins in narrative and the 'parents' of that proto rMa da or Myi bo-type of *gshen*. In the multi-layered and conflated construct of the PT1136 story, a developed version of the gShen rab(s) character (read: the

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[18] The exact nature of the problem is unclear. In any case, her complexion has turned dark and she may have trouble with her neck (due to suicide by hanging?), but the reading of the Tibetan is too insecure to be sure about that.

[19] Cf. also the more pronounced 'priestly' role of a sMra bon (zing ba) in PT1285.1041.

Myi bo-type of *gshen*, which I argue, etymologically and practically may here be equivalent with its rMa da [na] or rMa dad funerary double) meets face to face with his earliest lay prototype with the *smra*/*rma* name: the sMa bu story character, who here clearly hasn't embarked on a 'priestly' career yet, including an encounter with 'his' or, as the case may be, 'their' parents. The contexts of later references to a figure with a name very similar to sMa bu/sMra bon (gyi) zing ba'i zing skyes, to wit sMra bon zing ba (in PT1285.1041), clearly indicate some kind of 'priestly' skill and function for that rMa bon-type of Bon po, in possibly related narrative contexts. If this admittedly speculative line of reasoning is tenable, in these few pertinent Dunhuang sources alone we would by now already have witnessed at least three stages in the development of the gShen rab(s) character:

1. The sMa bu/sMra bon: rMa da or Myi bo Zing ba'i zing skyes' lay origins, in PT1136;
2. His first narrative appearance as an expert sMra bon ritual specialist, in PT1285; and
3. A probably later narrative overlay of a superior supervising ritual specialist in PT1136, the great Myi bo *gshen* type, which, I would argue, at that point is not yet strongly separated from his *'dur* alter ego or alternative: the rMa da (na) funerary type of *gshen*.

The *Klu 'bum* and *mDo 'dus* expand the gShen story paradigm further and add a *Leitfaden* of Bon identity (epitomised by the addition of the title "sTon pa": Teacher), and they moreover narrow down the options by preferring the gShen rab(s) over the Dur gshen type.

The Pha Dur gshen rma da (na) funerary type of senior ritual specialist, at the time of the formation of self-consciously Bon hagiographical literature (such as the *mDo 'dus*), in an early *phyi dar* Buddhist dominated milieu, was too tainted by his *'dur* (read: blood sacrifice) associations to be able to appear centre stage and really shine in such a 'reformist' milieu. In one-upmanship with arising Buddhist sects over a prestigious founder, a more neutral 'excellent' *gshen* (or an expert man from the *gshen* clan) apparently was preferable to the old *'dur*-type of *gshen*, associated as the latter was with contested, bloody funerary rites. It is telling indeed that the rMa da na-type of gShen rises to prominence once again in the mentioned *'Dur chog* and *Mu cho'i khrom 'dur* rites, which consciously court and perhaps also reinvent controversial 'old and powerful' *'dur* funerary expertise to be used eccentrically, specifically for cases of violent death (*gri 'dur*). For ordinary deaths these *'dur* rites would not be considered appropriate. He also survives in other narratives related to Dunhuang-style death and healing paradigms, such as in the *rNel*

dri 'dul ba'i thabs (Pasang Wangdu 2007:36.9), fairly recently uncover-
ed from dGa' thang 'bum pa in gTam shul, southern Tibet, which
seems to tell and rephrase ancient Dunhuang period ritual narratives
in slightly adjusted forms.

    The dating of these texts is uncertain. In any case it seems
improbable that the non-Buddhist section, which Pasang Wangdu
identifies as Bon, would physically pertain to the imperial period.
That some of the narratives and rituals continue traditions of the
Dunhuang period still appears obvious. Equally obvious are the stray
odd name and other anachronistic elements that reveal later redac-
tion of the material. It may be more cautious to consider a date of not
earlier than the eleventh century, for all the material, and not, as does
Pasang Wangdu, only for the Buddhist texts.

    At this point a brief reflection on early usage of the terms *bon* and
bon po would be in place, as they provide the backdrop against which
the present revisionist line of argument on possible origins of matters
bon and *gshen* are to be appreciated. These sections have already been
published, however, and shall therefore not be repeated here.[20]

rMa lo & g-Yu lo, An Odd Couple

In the *mDo 'dus*—apparently out of the blue—the rMa lo and g-Yu lo
pair suddenly appears in the narratives of sTon pa gShen rab, as his
kin and close disciples. These exceptionally flat story characters are of
somewhat confused descent and also do not seem to have much of a
philological 'pedigree' in earlier sources. Moreover, the members of
the rMa lo g-Yu lo pair, just like most of the offspring in the
'expedition abroad' narratives of the *mDo 'dus*, show preciously little
individuality: they take up the conceptual space of approximately
one, rather flat story character.

    g-Yu appears much less frequently in Dunhuang names than *rma*,
sma or *smra*. As far as I am aware, there is no convincing passage that
may have informed the rMa lo and g-Yu lo pair of the *mDo 'dus* and
other later sources. *g-Yu* does occasionally show up paired with *smra*,
but these passages do not yield a convincing pedigree. The best
match that I have been able to find, so far, is the paired occurrence of
two personal names: sMra gol (skyi ma/mthing) (=Thang ma brla
ma) and (Thang ba) g-Yu thang, in one of the narratives of PT1285.32
& 53. Both names contain references to a blue-green colour (i.e.:
mthing: azure and *g-yu*: turquoise) and could be read as toponyms
that refer to a sKyi mthing country and a g-Yu thang plane. Both

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[20]   For it suffices to refer to the correspondingly titled sections in Blezer (2008), *sTon
        pa gShen rab*.

suggest lofty blue-green grazing grounds or forests. In fact, the appearance of sMra folk in sKyi mthing touches on an important point on locations that I have developed elsewhere: as a country of the sMra (see IOL734), sKyi mthing could be identical with sMra yul (thag brgyad).[21] Possibly, after a process of prolonged narrative reconfigurations, even all three names came to refer to a similar area with bluish greenery. In the *rNel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* (28.10f) appears a figure named mDo lcam rMa lo rma lo sman, daughter of rDo rje gsum po, the Lord of mDo ro gsum, and his spouse sKyin za Thing tsun ma.[22]

Even though I am yet far from convinced, some things are already starting to add up. Stray paired references to *smra/rma* and *g-yu* in gShen (rab)-related stories, such as are preserved here in PT1285, might still be the origin of the rMa lo and g-Yu lo pair. Perhaps their name was also positively reinforced by the memory of the, later, somewhat rarefied name of the <u>rMa</u> da (na)-type of Dur gshen that also occurs in gShen rab(s) environment. Considering that *rma* and *g-yu* do occasionally show up in geographically remote Dunhuang and moreover in rMa da and Myi bo narrative environments, is it really surprising that, several centuries later, a *rma* name was remembered as, somehow, closely connected to the gShen rab myi bo figure in the rMa lo and g-Yu lo pair? I don't know. If that would be all we have, it would be better to drop this particular excursion. Fortunately, there is more.

Taking this conjecture just one step further: perhaps the later narrative construction of rMa lo and g-Yu lo in the *mDo 'dus* was an acceptable way of incorporating that important *rma* name into the narrative environment of the more developed sTon pa gshen rab figure, of a self-consciously Bon hagiography. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Dur gshen rma da (na)-type of ritual specialist originally may well have been a funerary variant of the gShen rab(s) myi bo type.[23] Something of that well-known *rma* name, which sounded so familiar and thoroughly 'Bon', was thus preserved by adjoining it to the newly invented sTon pa, gShen-rab-the-founder character, as a related pair of disciples. It may be telling in this regard that, in later sources, ('Dur gsas) rMa lo indeed appears as a variant of the rMa da name.[24] Absorbing/preserving *rma* in(to) rMa lo and g-Yu lo may have been the best option available. This obligatory

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[21]   Blezer (2012), *It All Happened in Myi yul skyi mthing*.
[22]   Cf. discussions of the toponym sKyi mthing in Blezer (2012), *It All Happened in Myi yul skyi mthing*.
[23]   Cf. Blezer (2008), *sTon pa gShen rab*.
[24]   *sNod rten 'byung ba chags 'jig pa'i mdo*, p.144.2, and *Srid pa khams gsum sems can skye mchi'i mdo*, p.124.5: *'dur gsas rma lo*.

presence has nonetheless also been reduced to insignificance, as has the presence of the rMa da (na)-type of Dur gshen *vis-à-vis* the Myi bo gShen rab(s) type, in later, run of the mill Bon rites.

Elsewhere,[25] I showed that the rMa name was there to stay in Bon. It continues into that famous rMa ston Bon family teaching lineage that produced the *Gling grags* cluster of historical narratives that the recipient of this felicitation volume, Dan Martin (mainly on the annotation), and Per Kvaerne (mainly on the translation) are working on. These are among the earliest surviving comprehensive Bon historical identity narratives (the profound rMa family influence ranges from the *Gling grags* historical narratives to *mDzod phug* 1-0-1 of Bon *Abhidharma*). The rMa family is closely connected to the mainly *gter ma* origins of Bon literature and thus to the early formation of a Bon canon. The rMa ston lineage is also closely connected to the origins of Bon as a cluster of traditions that arose in active dialogue with Buddhist traditions. It in fact embodies the earliest discernible traces of what later (approximately in the 15th century AD) has been styled *gter gsar* and, probably still later (18th century AD?), *bon gsar*.

Conclusion

Brief conclusions of these investigations have already appeared in print (in fact even reprint).[26] Because the present conclusions are so much entangled with other lines of the historiographical arguments on narrativisation of Bon origins and the emergence of early Bon identity narratives, it may be useful to reiterate (part of) the concluding sections of those earlier publications on *The World According to the rMa Family* here, including references to some of the publications where the individual lines of the complex analyses are developed and discussed in more detail.

- The grand narrative of the western origins of Bon is demonstrably later (late 11th or 12th century AD, e.g. the *Gling grags* cluster of texts) than the first historical beginnings of self-conscious Bon (the *mDo 'dus* and *Klu 'bum*).[27] Key narrative elements of the origin stories are, instead, traceable to areas more centrally in Tibet (*rMa* and *sKyi* localities) that are mainly known from their connections with early centres of

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[25]   Blezer (2013), *The Paradox of Bon Identity*, and Blezer (2013/2017), *The World According to the rMa Family*.

[26]   Blezer (2013/2017), *The World According to the rMa Family*.

[27]   See Blezer (2011), *Creation of a Myth* and Blezer (2010) *William of Ockham*.

Buddhism and often, in various ways, are deeply involved with rMa names.[28]

- The name of the founder of Bon, gShen rab mi bo, appears to have its most immediately verifiable origins (i.e. those that are still relevant to organised Bon) in relatively late narrative constructs, as preserved in Dunhuang sources, and not in any other historical realities. The earliest occurrences of the name, in puzzling ways, are also involved with names of a rMa-type.

- The claimed centrality of gShen rab(s)-related families (gShen and dMu), before the 10th century AD, may be a later ideological construct, grafted on sparsely surviving historical data, a bit like the later projections of the western origins for Bon. Yet, this manoeuvre is scarcely able to conceal more convincingly historical realities of the ubiquitous prominence of rMa names, in connection with both pre-10th century narratives on gShen figures and with the first self-consciously Bon but also somewhat curiously 'eclectic' religious historical narratives that arise later.[29]

- Blondeau has shown that the rMa family is intimately connected with the highly influential early Bon historical identity narratives that appear in the *bsGrags pa gling grags* cluster of historical texts. These texts, in her and also in my own analyses, clearly and consciously try to negotiate Buddhist heritage in Bon.[30]

- By a quirk of history, later, more exclusivist Bon historians have chosen to gloss over almost completely all the many pivotal links to the rMa clan, possibly because of their ideological affinities with Buddhist traditions.

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[28] See Blezer (forthcoming), *Breaking the Paradigm: Tibetan Bon po-s and their Origin Narratives* (on *rMa*) and Blezer (2012), *Mi yul skyi mthing* (on *sKyi*).

[29] See Blezer (2013), *The Paradox of Bon Identity Discourse*.

[30] See Blezer, *The Paradox of Bon Identity Discourse*.

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