The Bheda's Pony
Horse breeding, castration, and trade in Spiti in the 18th–20th centuries

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A horse is judged by its saddle
A man is judged by his work

The Himalayan valley of Spiti (*spyi ti*, *spi ti*, *pi ti*) in the state of Himachal Pradesh is home to one of the six indigenous horse breeds of India: the Spiti horse.[1] Early travel and colonial literature from the 19th century is unanimous in praising the feats of this high-altitude mount. The authors of these accounts also observe that most Spiti horses were gelded and traded in the neighbouring regions of West Tibet, Ladakh, Kulu, and Kinnaur. The castration of stallions did not only make these horses better behaved and easier to control, but may also have been an attempt to secure the local breeders a monopoly in the region. In the 1980s, the state of Himachal Pradesh set up a horse breeding farm towards the conservation of Spiti horses. Since then, the economic value of this breed has increased year on year at domestic and international trading fairs. Nowadays, it is not unusual to read that the people of Spiti have been engaged in horse rearing "since ages" if not "since times immemorial" in specialised literature. But what is the historical basis for such a statement?

In this paper, I will therefore examine the breeding of horses, the castration of stallions, and the socio-economic importance of these animals for the people of Spiti during the last three centuries. In doing so, I draw on Tibetan legal documents from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as European travelogues and colonial reports produced in the 19th and 20th centuries when the border valley of Spiti was under the power of British India. The picture that emerges from these sources is complemented by more recent ethnographic work and scientific

[1] Although technically a pony, I will also refer to this equid as a horse in accordance with both lay and specialised publications; see CHAUHAN 2005: 36.

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research where necessary.

The starting point of the present study are two legal documents (BmK11 and BmK25) issued a century apart, which granted a particular household, namely the Bheda of Dangkhar, the exclusive right to geld horses on behalf of the entire valley of Spiti. Who were these people and under what criteria were they better positioned to deal with geldings? Correspondingly, who were the legal authorities responsible for the issuance of these permits and where did their interest in Spiti horses came from? These are some of the questions that the present research seeks to address.

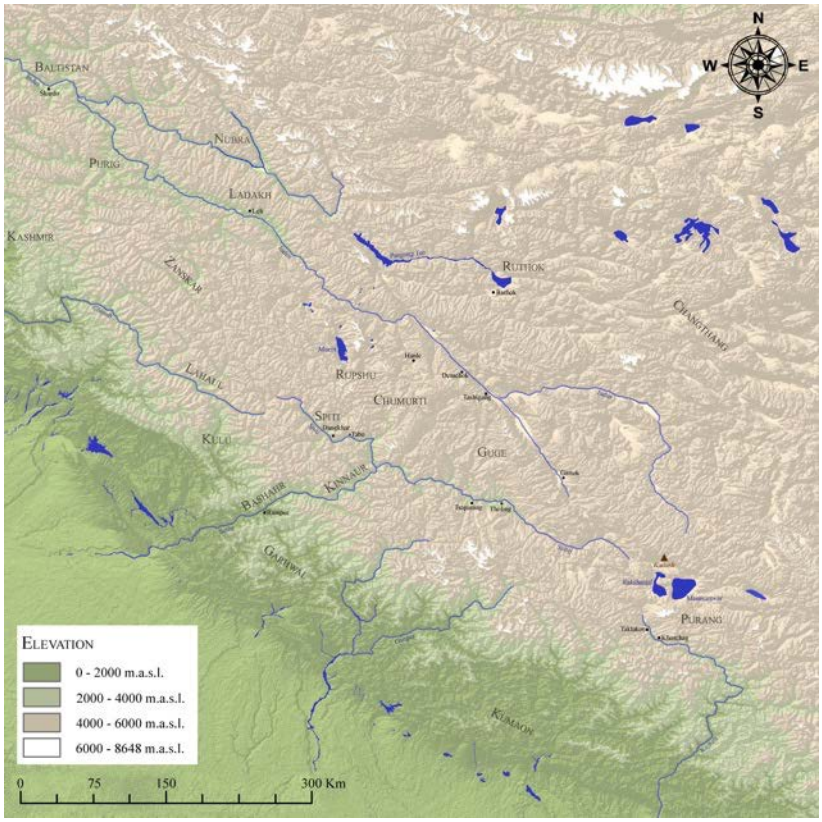

Figure 1 – The Western Himalayas in historical times and the main places discussed in this article. Map: the author, 2019.

1. The Spiti pony or Chamurti horse

In his book *The Abode of Snow* Andrew Wilson (1831–1881), who travelled from Kinnaur to Kashmir in 1873, conveyed his appreciation and admiration for Spiti horses:

> The small ponies are famous for their surefootedness, their sagacity, and their power of carrying their rider safely up and down the most terrible, dangerous, and fatiguing paths. (…) No one who had not seen the performance of a Spiti pony could have believed it possible for any animal of the kind to go over the ground at all, and much less with a rider upon it. (…) I speak in this way, however, only of the best ponies of Spiti and Zanskar, and not of those of Lahaul, or any of the lower Himalayan provinces, which are much inferior.[2]

Amongst the six indigenous horse breeds (*Equus caballus*) of India, the Zanskari and Spiti horses are well known for their adaptation to high altitude and mountainous terrain.[3] Their small sizes, however, should technically rank them among ponies rather than horses. The Zanskari ponies, like their Spiti cousins, seems to have been much in demand already in the late 19th–early 20th centuries.[4] Indeed, genetic diversity analysis shows that the two breeds are closely related, possibly due to the movements of these animals in the region and the geographical proximity of the two breeding areas (Fig.1).[5]

The Spiti pony also goes by the name Chamurti horse (alt. Chamurthi, Chhumurthi). It owes this intriguing epithet to the region of Chumurti (*chu mur ti*), on the other side of the border with Tibet.[6] Major William Hay (1805–1879), who was the first to hold the position of Assistant Commissioner of Kulu,[7] reported on the presence of two different types of Ghoonts, a term for Himalayan horses,[8] during his

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2 WILSON 1875: 244–245, 261–264.

3 The four other horse breeds of India are the Kathiawari horse from Gujarat, the Marwari horse from Rajasthan, the Manipuri pony from Assam, and the Bhutia pony from Darjeeling in Sikkim.

4 On the Trans-Himalayan trade of Zanskari horses in the first half of the 20th century, see RIZVI 1999.

5 On the genetic characterisation of Indian horses and genetic closeness of Zanskari and Spiti ponies, see CHAUHAN et al. 2004; BEHL et al. 2006; GUPTA et al. 2012; GUPTA et al. 2014.

6 The area of Chumurti takes its name from the river (*ti*) Chumur. This river valley is situated in the Zanda County (*rtsa mda' rdzong*) of the Ngari Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region about 60km east of Spiti as the crow flies.

7 The annexation of the Spiti Valley by the East India Company took place in 1846. From that time onwards, the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu administered the three contiguous valleys of Kulu, Lahaul, and Spiti. This official took up his position at Nagar in the greener and milder hills of Kulu and would visit the Spiti Valley only intermittently.

8 From Urdu *ghūṅṭ* or *gūṅṭh*; a Himalayan horse or hill pony. The use of this word is already attested during the Mughal period. In his official history of Akbar's reign titled *Ain I Akbari*, court historian Abū Al-Faẓl Ibn Mubārak (1551–1602) writes: "In

inspection of the Spiti Valley in 1849:

> The Ghoont, although a useful animal, seldom carries any burden but a man; the total number in Spiti is 365, but bred chiefly for sale. They have two breeds, one small Ghoont, never above 12 hands high,[9] peculiar to the country. The other a large breed of Ghoonts, from 13 to 13½ hands high, is bought from the Chinese,[10] and usually comes from 'Chúmúrti'. For a Chinese Ghoont two years old, they give a four-year-old Spiti Ghoont. All are equally hardy, and are kept out the whole winter,–all except the yearlings, which are housed. During winter, the Ghoonts live entirely upon the roots of stunted bushes, and are very expert at scraping the snow from off them with their fore feet.[11]

The body of the Spiti pony or Chamurti horse is generally well developed and muscular (Fig.2). Typical coat colours are dune, brown, dark grey, and piebald. The head is heavy, with sharp erected ears, leading down to a short, bulky neck with a long mane. The back is short with strong hindquarters, and a slightly sloped rump whilst the tail is full and long. The legs of these ponies are short and sturdy; often covered with long, coarse hair. The hooves are rounded and well-shaped, with extremely tough horn suitable for covering mountainous terrain; for that reason, the Spiti ponies were usually unshod in the past.[12]

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the northern mountainous district of Hindustan, a kind of small but strong horse is bred, which are called *gūṭ*"; see ABŪ AL-FAẒL 1927: 140.

9 Horses are traditionally measured in hands, particularly ponies. According to Hay's observation, the small breed described in the passage above was generally inferior to 121,9cm (12 hh) while Chamurti horses would measure between 132-137cm (13-13,5 hh). Recent research gives the Spiti horse an average body height of 129cm; see PUNDIR 2004.

10 Early Western travellers who toured the Indo-Tibetan border regions of the Western Himalayas often wrongly described local Tibetans as 'Chinese Tartars'.

11 HAY 1850: 441.

12 WILSON 1875: 262–263; MURRAY-AYNSLEY 1882: 68.

Figure 2 – A group of Spiti horses roaming freely on the high-altitude tracks of Spiti. Photo: the author, 2016.

There is a general consensus that the Spiti breed is well adapted to its environment. It thrives in cold climate and survives well on scarce forage resources during winters. It is highly valued for its stamina (*shugs*) and sure-footedness (*rkang gnyis legs par 'jug*), displaying an intelligent (*blo ldan*) and alert attitude (*rang bzhin rno*) in all circumstances. Imbued with these qualities, the Spiti horse is able to undertake long journeys in the most extreme terrain condition of high-altitude deserts. In a typical display of British wit, military officer Philip Henry Egerton (1824–1893) sketches a deceptively negative portrait of his steed during a tour of the valley in 1863:

> We started on our return up the Spiti valley. I had hitherto preferred walking the marches, though I hired a pony, at sixpence per diem which was led after me, more for the look of the thing than anything else; but now I was a cripple and was constrained to trust myself on a pony – 'a mare of the desert' indeed 'a gallant grey' with a vengeance! the most unmitigated brute I ever bestrode.[13] She was a stout, good-looking beast, and took my eye at first; but – for stopping every ten yards up-hill to blow, – for lifting both fore legs together and letting them down

[13] It is generally admitted that mares can be temperamental and show behavioural changes particularly when they come into heat.

> with a plump when descending a rocky path, – for always shying at the dogs in a dangerous place (and nowhere else!), – for going closer to the edge of a precipice than any other brute, and letting her hind legs slip over the path when crossing a particularly steep bed of shingle (sending your heart into your mouth with a jerk !), – for squeezing close up to the inside of the path if there happened to be a projecting rock to catch your knee, – for always choosing the wrong path if there were a choice, and when there was apparently no option, coolly bolting up or down a precipitous bank for a particular bit of vegetation which took her fancy, keeping the smallest possible speck of both reverted eyes on you all the time, in a way that became at last quite insupportable – in short, for aggravating a man in every conceivable and in every inconceivable way, I would back her against any female in creation.[14]

The socio-economic aspects of horse rearing in Spiti have aroused great interest in the last twenty years.[15] Traditionally, Spiti horses have been used as a means of transport, a source of power for agricultural work (i.e. ploughing), occasionally as pack animals, but above all as status symbols and articles of trade. Practices involving horses in Spiti generally follow cultural trends shared by other nomadic and agropastoral groups of Tibet and Inner Asia.[16] These include horse racing (*rta rgyug*) as well as the participation of horses in wedding ceremonies (*bag ston*) and in the propitiation ritual of territorial deities (*lha gsol*) performed at hill summits. [17] Horsemanship activities therefore involve social engagement, which helps in shaping the identity of communities.

Colonial literature generally contends that horse owners were found mostly among the tax-paying landholders (*khang chen pa*) of Spiti. These farmers, who owned most of the agricultural land of the valley, numbered 300 households and were grouped into five administrative units.[18] The principal landowners of Spiti, argues social anthropologist Christian Jahoda, were indeed more likely to keep horses as they would have been able to produce "sufficient supplies of fodder or the capital to finance the use of pasture owned by another

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14 EGERTON 1864: 48.

15 DIXIT 1997; CHAUHAN 2005; CHAUHAN 2008; PAL et al. 2011.

16 DIEMBERGER AND DIEMBERGER 2019.

17 TASHI TSERING 2014: 191.

18 The five administrative units (*tshug so*; *koṭhī*) comprised the lower valley (*sham*), the middle valley (*bar*; *bar cig*), the upper valley (*stod*), the side valley of Pin (*sprin*, *pin*), and the communal ecclesiastical estate (*mchod gzhis*) of Spiti. The study of Tibetan taxation records from Spiti by Dieter Schuh shows an increase of tax-paying households from 250 to 300 households in the 19th century; see SCHUH 2016: 91–92.

individual".[19] This view seems to be corroborated by field data. According to settlement reports, there were 365 horses in Spiti in 1849,[20] 335 in 1871,[21] 512 in 1891,[22] and 629 in 1913,[23] giving an average of 1.5 horse per household for the period under review.[24] British official James Broadwood Lyall (1839–1916), who produced one of the most detailed settlement reports on Spiti in 1874, summarizes some of the key points discussed previously:

> Most of the Spiti landholders own one or two ponies; they sell some in Basáhir and a few in Kulu,[25] but the great traffic is with the neighbouring Tibetan province of Chamarthi. The Spiti pony is a handsomely shaped animal, but very small; he is very sure-footed, and will carry you a long distance over bad roads in a short time at the pace he is taught, which is a kind of amble or running walk. In India, or on the southern side of the Himalayas, he is apt to get sluggish. A number of the ponies seen in Spiti are from Charmarthi, where the breed is of a larger size. The Spiti-men exchange one broken in four-year old pony for two Chamarthi colts; when the two are full grown, they sell one for cash and goods, and again exchange the other for two more colts; this is the great way in which they raise money to pay the revenue and buy tobacco, tea, &c. The price of a good pony in Spiti ranges from fifty to a hundred rupees. In the lower part of the valley they are out at grass most of the winter, while in the upper part they have to be stall-fed. Nearly all are gelded.[26]

As the preceding passage outlines, the main farming households of Spiti would have had one or perhaps two animals. It was the trade of Spiti horses, however, that gave this robust and sure-footed equid its economic value, making the so-called Chamurti horse a highly prized commodity in the early 20th century.

To this day, the rearing of horses has been essentially the affair of

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19 JAHODA 2015: 203, n.351.
20 HAY 1850: 441.
21 DIACK 1899: 106.
22 DIACK 1899: 106; COLDSTREAM 1913: 9.
23 COLDSREAM 1913: 9.
24 In 1913, however, British Settlement Officer John Coldstream (1877–1954) remarked "The Spitial's one source of gain is the breeding and selling of ponies, and only about half the landowners have ponies, the number of which has increase from 512 to 629 since 1891"; see COLDSTREAM 1913: 9. The decline of horse owners accompanied by an increase of animals observed by Coldstream seems to be indicative of the growing importance of horse breeding and trade at the turn of the 20th century.
25 The princely states Bashahr-Kinnaur and Kulu in today's state of Himachal Pradesh, India.
26 LYALL 1874: 196.

the side valley of Pin, an area of Spiti with a horse breeding culture of its own. Fifteen villages of the Pin Valley have been reportedly engaged in the rearing and breeding of these animals.[27] The horse owners from Pin are primarily farmers; horse breeding remaining secondary to agricultural work. Spiti horses are usually reared under a stationary and migratory system. The animals are stall-fed during the winter months from December to May. The foaling usually takes place in April and May. It is followed by the rebreeding of brood mares. In June, all horses from a single village are moved to high mountain pastures for the summer months except for the young foals and pregnant mares. A horse breeder (*rta rdzi*) is assisted by a groom (*rta g.yog*) to look after the herd. Two other individuals replace them after about two weeks. The herd is taken back to the village with the first snowfalls usually in late October early November.

Once a year, a local committee composed of elders and local breeders reviews eligible stallions for servicing the mares from two or three villages. The owners of brood mares are required to pay a fee in cash or in kind towards the upkeep of the nominated stallion.[28] This practice is attested already at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1912, Settlement Officer John Coldstream remarked that 64 bushels of grains were required per village for participation in the 'horse fair' of the Pin Valley.[29] To this day, the rebreeding is performed by natural mating around the month of April, when the selected stallion and the mares are set loose to roam freely. A stallion is used for covering mares during a single mating season, after which it is gelded. Since the 1990s, the castration of surplus males (i.e. geldings) has been conducted annually by the Department of Animal Husbandry of Himachal Pradesh.

Horse castration is an important aspect of horse breeding. Gelding is mostly performed to make equids calmer and easier to handle. This procedure can also remove a horse from the gene pool; notably if the animal is of lower quality or in order to help horse owners maintain a continuing demand. Information about the local system of castration in Spiti, prior to veterinary interventions, is hard to come by. This operation has usually been performed under the religious guidance of village priests (*jo ba*) and traditional physicians (*am chi*) who would conduct rituals on behalf of the animals. It involves the recitation of

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27 PAL 2011; BODH (n.d.).

28 BODH (n.d.).

29 "In Kothi Pin certain hamlets contributed 64 *khals* as a subscription to the Pin horse fair". The term *khal* designates a Tibetan unit of measure for grains (e.g. barley seeds); see COLDSTREAM 1913: 8.

Buddhist *dhāraṇī* or 'ritual spells for horses' (*rta gzungs*).[30] It is believed that the reading of these formulae out loud will help protect the new geldings from postoperative complications, illnesses, and suffering. I was not able, however, to gather details about the castration procedure *per se* in former times, which was characterised as "risky and unscientific" by Veterinary Officer Vinod Kumar Bodh.[31]

The earliest text describing horse castration in a Tibetan context was found amongst the Dunhuang manuscripts and dates to before the 11th century. This text belongs to a set of documents concerned mostly with veterinary knowledge, known as hippiatry, which have been studied by Tibetologist Anne-Marie Blondeau. [32] In Pelliot Tibétan 1064, gelding is advised as a corrective treatment against what may be seen as horse lymphangitis. The passage reads:

> If this is not enough, bring the penis out of the sheath and incise [the skin of] the testicles just a little. Lying flat on the back, one then moves the horse down [on the side] in order to draw about one and a half *lto gu* of blood.[33] At this moment, pressing down the testicular vein with a *lbang bu*,[34] cut off the testicles and discard them. Apply butter to stop the vein bleeding and cauterise [the wound] with a stone or [a piece of] steel. When the bleeding has stopped, break the *lbang bu* too and release [the

[30] The collection of *Horse Dhāraṇī* (*rta gsungs*) used in Spiti during the castration of horses includes texts such as the *'Phags pa re manta zhes bya ba'i gzungs* (Skt. *Āryatathāgataremanta*), *'Phags pa re manta zhes bya ba'i gzungs* (Skt. *Āryaremantanāmadhāraṇī*), *'Phags pa mgon po nag po rta'i gzungs* (Skt. *Āryaśrīmahākāladhāraṇī*), *dPal nag po chen po khams gsum la dbang bsgyur ba* (Skt. *Śrīmahāyoginī*), *rGyal po rnam thos sras kyis dpal phyag na rdo rje ri rab kyi zo ma na bzhugs pa* (Skt. *Vaiśravaṇavajra**), and the *'Phags pa rta nad thams cad rab tu zhi bar byed pa'i gzungs* (Skt. *Āryaghoṭadhāraṇī*) to name the most popular ones; I wish to thank Patrick Sutherland and Dechen Lhundrup from Tabo for identifying these texts and Ulrike Roesler for her comments.

[31] BODH (n.d.).

[32] The Old Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang were written between the 9th century and 11th century. Among these documents, Pelliot Tibétain no.1061-1065, together with the manuscripts no.760-763 from the India Office Library, deal specifically with horses and veterinary science; see BLONDEAU 1972.

[33] Blondeau suggests that the term *lto gu*, literally 'little belly', must refer to a unit of capacity which she cannot identify. If not Tibetan, this term could perhaps be related to the Chinese word for 'bucket', 'Chinese peck' or 'a dry measure for grain' (個斗; *ge dou*). I am grateful to David Neil Schmid and Nathan W. Hill for their comments about this term.

[34] Blondeau translates the word *lbang bu* as 'string'; i.e. 'ficelle' in French. While the syllable *bu* may be understood as a diminutive, the word *lbang* is unknown to me. Alternatively, this term may perhaps be the translation of the Chinese word for a 'wooden stick' or 'cudgel' (木棒; *mu bang*). I wish to thank David Neil Schmid for his suggestion.

horse].[35]

In her fascinating account *Horses Like Lightning*, anthropologist Sienna Craig offers a glimpse into what traditional gelding must have looked like in Mustang, and perhaps other regions of the Himalayas, until recently.[36] The removal of the testicles was done with a sharp, heated knife. Following the operation, the wound was not stitched to avoid altering the horse's gait and instead, the incision would be washed and treated with a poultice. According to Craig's informants, after a recovery period, the new gelding was ridden lightly to prevent a constriction of the hindquarters. Not unlike in Spiti, she notes tensions between the proponents of traditional gelding practices and the government veterinarians of Nepal.

Finally, a first-hand account on gelding horses comes from contemporary Tibet. In his study on ecological knowledge and pastoralism in the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of North-eastern Tibet (Qinghai), Chos-bstan-rgyal provides the following description:

> One stallion is shared by several encampments or between relatives. Since the number of mature stallions is kept to a minimum, gelding horses is done with great care. When a horse reaches the age of three, a family member finds someone who can geld horses. In 2013, only two people in Smug po knew how to geld horses (…)
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> Several men gather, tie the horse's front and hind legs together, and then slowly lay it on the ground on its side. A knife is sharpened and purified with *bsang* smoke. They then put a stick between the horse's teeth to prevent it from biting its tongue during castration. The man who will geld the horse first washes the horse's scrotum with water and then with liquor, before using a very sharp knife to make an incision in the scrotum, through which he removes the testicles with his hands; the testicles are then discarded. When he finishes, he uses a hot iron to cauterize the wound, and then ties the scrotum very tightly with a string. Bleeding then stops and the scrotum drops off within the next two months.
>
> The men untie the horse's legs and, then, because the horse is weak and in pain, they help it to stand up, and cover it with robes

[35] *des ma thub na rlig pa phyags bu'I nang nas phyung la | 'bras bu bag ste | de nas gan rkyal las | phyir bsnyal te | khrag gzags la | lto gu phye[d] dang do tsam phyung la | de nas gzod | rlIg pa'I rtsa | lbang bus mnan te | rlIg 'bras bcad de | bor la rtsa khrag zad pa'I mar gyis bskus la | rdo 'am lcags kyIs bsregs la khrag zad pa dang | lbang bu yang bshig ste btang ngo |*; for a different translation of this passage in French, see Pelliot Tibétain 1064–B3, line 3-5 in BLONDEAU 1972: 248–249.

[36] CRAIG 2008: 87–88.

> (…) because [it] cannot lie down for at least one month, so they ensure that the horse remains standing. After around ten days, they start riding the horse to strengthen it, but they sit in the horse's rump rather than its back. The horse becomes accustomed to whatever it is taught during this period.[37]

Several details of this account are reminiscent of the chirurgical procedure described in the Dunhuang document or as reported in highland Nepal. We also note that the upkeep of a single stallion for breeding purposes and the castration of the remaining studs are in accordance with observations made in Spiti.

Overall, ethnographic and veterinary studies are generally consistent with colonial literature and show that Spiti horses have been bred mostly for trade, at least from the 19th century onwards. Traditionally, the horse owners from the Pin Valley would rear both foals and fillies until the age of three years. The surplus of geldings and mares would be sold at trade fairs across the Western Himalayas; a subject to which I will return further down.

In this regard, the Buchens (*bu chen*) played an important role in taking Spiti horses to Ladakh in recent years. The Buchens from the Pin Valley are a class of religious performers and wandering minstrels.[38] Social anthropologist Pascal Dollfus notes that at the beginning of each summer some Buchens would cross the Parung Pass (*pha rang la*), which separates the Spiti Valley from the Rupshu area (*ru shod*, *rub shog*), and proceed towards Ladakh.[39] On route, they would stop at villages and nomad camps to stage religious performances. During these halts, the travelling group would also take the opportunity to hold trading negotiations. They would sell Spiti horses and purchase yaks, furs, blankets, wool, and some pashm in return. In the year 2000, for instance, a party from the Pin Valley composed of two Buchens, two monks, and a trader went to Ladakh with nineteen horses. They returned two months later with a caravan of fifteen yaks and numerous bags of wool, blankets, and rugs.[40] According to Dollfus, the Pin Buchens would also trade Spiti horses at an annual fair held in Rampur in Shimla District in the past.

It is generally believed that the Lavi Fair at Rampur Busharh was established under the reign of Raja Kehri Singh (1639–1696) in the aftermath of the Tibet-Bashahr Treaty of 1679.[41] To this day, the Lavi

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37 CHOS BSTAN RGYAL 2014: 146.
38 DOLLFUS 2004; SUTHERLAND 2011; DOLLFUS 2017.
39 DOLLFUS 2004: 9.
40 DOLLFUS 2004: 11.
41 HALKIAS 2009a; HALKIAS 2009b. British Lieutenant Thomas Hutton (1806–1875) gives a vivid description of the commercial activities taken place during the Lavi Fair in the 1830s. There is curiously no mention of horses: "This place is therefore

Fair is still the largest trading event in the Western Himalayas. The trade of Spiti horses, in particular, has experienced an incredible economic boom over the last two decades. Popularly rebranded as the 'ship of the cold desert' or 'snow horse', Spiti horses now attract the attention of horse aficionados and domestic buyers, including the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) forces of India,[42] during a 'Spiti Horse Show' organised by the Animal Husbandry Department. Every year, 250 to 350 horses from Spiti are taken to Rampur for the fair, commanding a price ten times higher today than they did twenty years ago.[43]

In spite of its popularity and rising value, the Spiti horse is viewed as an endangered breed. Indeed, the traditional breeding practices of the Pin Valley, which dictate that only a limited number of stallions be

strictly speaking a manufacturing town, where those of its inhabitants who are not engaged in travelling with grain into Ludak [i.e. Ladakh] and Chinese Tartary [i.e. Tibet], are employed in the manufacturing of pushmeena chuddurs [i.e. pashmina shawls] (…) It is here that in the beginning of November the great fair is held, which draws together the people from the upper hills to barter the products of those elevated tracks for that of the lower hills and plains. Here may be seen commingled in one grotesque assemblage the Tartars of Hungrung, of Spiti, of Ludak and Chinese Tartary, with the inhabitants of Kunawur [i.e. Kinnaur], of the lower hills and plains, and sometimes also with those of Europe. Among these tribes little or perhaps no money is exchanged, but the dealers in tobacco or grain offer to the seller of wool or woollen cloths an equivalent quantity of merchandise for that which he requires, and thus in a very short time the produce of either country has changed masters (…) At this season the articles brought into the market from the upper hills, are blankets and sooklats from Lubrung, Khanum, Soongnum, and other places in upper Kunawar;–raisins, neozas, cummin seed, sheep, goats, and ghee from the lower parts ; –chowrees, birmore, pushm wool, byangee wool, silver and gold dust in small quantities, borax and salt, numdahs, &c., from Ludak and different parts of Tartary. These are exchanged for opium, celestial barley and wheat, tobacco, iron, butter, ghee, treacle or ghoor, linen cloths, brass pots, &c. all of which meet with a ready and profitable sale in the upper parts of the country. Within the last three or four years, the traders from Ludak have purchased opium, which they did not take previously. Ghee is not purchased for Ludak or Tartary, but butter is taken instead, and forms a great ingredient in the mess, which they make of tea and flour, and which forms their food"; see HUTTON 1839: 904–905.

42 CHAUHAN 2008.

43 Data retrieved from various sources suggest that the price of Spiti horses–depending upon age, sex, and physical characteristics–went up from about Rs 6,400 in 1999 to Rs 50,500 in 2018; with some animals being sold up to Rs 80,000 in 2016; see CHAUHAN 2005: 36 and the following webpages:
https://www.oneindia.com/2008/11/06/chamurthi-steeds-steal-show-rampur-horse-fair-himachal-1225991100.html (last retrieved February 2024)
https://www.thestatesman.com/features/chamurti-horses-exotic-as-ever-1478952904.html (last retrieved January 2020)
https://www.news18.com/news/lifestyle/himachals-centuries-old-lavi-fair-to-begin-on-november-11-1933099.html (last retrieved February 2024).

kept, could contribute to the extinction of these equids.[44] To address these concerns, the State of Himachal Pradesh established a State Horse Breeding Farm towards the preservation of the Spiti breed at Kamand in Mandi District in 1986. The farm was subsequently relocated to the village of Lari in Spiti in 2002. Despite the threat to Spiti horses, the reputation of this Himalayan steed is well established outside the boundaries of India. In 2000, the State Horse Breeding Farm of Himachal Pradesh exported seven Spiti horses to the Royal Government of Bhutan.[45]

In view of the above discussion, it is found that anthropological and veterinary observations are generally in agreement with information recorded in early travel and colonial literature vis-à-vis Spiti horses. With few exceptions, members of the dominant economic class of the Spiti Valley would have owned one or two horses as marks of prestige and status symbols. However, the rearing of horses was mostly the affair of the villagers of the Pin Valley in Spiti. While historical data are still few and far between, the Pin breeders seem to have practiced very little controlled or selective breeding beyond the castration of stallions. Geldings were largely preferred to stallions and mares due to the absence of hormonal fluctuations, the castration process transforming them into biddable mounts: easier to work with and better-suited to the high-altitude and treacherous tracks criss-crossing the Western Himalayas. With a reputation for being a sure-footed and hardy mount, the Spiti pony was traded outside of the Spiti Valley. Yet this short overview describes equine practices and cultural trends that cannot be considered to represent conditions prior to the 19th century. How far back in history can we effectively trace the rearing of horses in Spiti and neighbouring regions is the question which needs to be addressed now.

2. Horses in West Tibet and Spiti

To recall the importance of horses in early human societies may seem trite and obvious, but given the removal of horses from our modern existence, the point deserves to be reiterated. The introduction of domestic horses changed the way many nomadic groups and agropastoral communities subsisted, communicated, waged wars, or considered life after death. The central place of these animals in Tibetan and Himalayan societies is no exception. Rather than presenting a comprehensive overview about horse domestication on the Tibetan plateau, I would like to look more closely at the specific

[44] CHAUHAN 2005: 36; BEHL et al 2006.
[45] CHAUHAN 2005: 36; CHAUHAN 2008.

history of the Western Himalayas. Archaeological evidence and literary sources draw attention to the crucial role equids have played in West Tibet and Spiti from an early age. Most noticeably, a traditional Tibetan narrative situates the origin of horses at the foothills of Mount Kailash in West Tibet.

The mythic origins of the horse is given in the first chapters of the *Treatise on Horses titled The Silver-White Mirror* (*rta gzhung dngul dkar me long*).[46] This work is commonly attributed to a Turkic (*gru gu*) scholar (*mkhas pa*) and physician (*sman pa*) named Seng-mdo chen-mo (alt. Seng-mdo 'od-chen), who is believed to have composed hippiatric manuals at the behest of the Tibetan Emperor Khri Srong-lde-btsan in the 8th century.[47] The legend about the origin of horses reported in this work not only displays strong indigenous elements but may also have served to convey basic hippologic concepts and hippiatric principles.[48]

Once upon a time, says *The Silver-White Mirror*, a lascivious female monkey (*ma sprel*) was attracted to a magnificent white vulture (*bya rgod*). After mating with the bird, the mother monkey laid five eggs which she then looked after over eleven months or so; an amount of time corresponding to the gestation period for horses.[49] Having placed the eggs inside the horn of a wild yak (*'brong*), she moved her progeny to a different location every three months as the seasons changed. In the three winter months, for example, the eggs were sheltered inside the cavity of a cliff, while they grew up in the wild during the rest of the year. This particular aspect of the narrative would thus seem to set out the twofold system of stationary and migratory breeding according to which horses are kept indoor in winter and left to fend for themselves on the high mountain pastures during the rest of the year. At the end of this period, the eggs eventually hatched giving birth to five types of horses.[50] After what amount to a short foaling period, the five horses were ready to clamber to their feet and fend for themselves. Galloping freely in the wild, their encounter with a forest ascetic precipitated their domestication. Infuriated by a cavalcade of unbridled behaviour, the sage cursed the horses sentencing the

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46 The Tibetan original of this narrative is given in appendix along with an English translation. I would like to thank Kalsang Norbu Gurung for his comments and suggestions regarding this text.

47 YE SHES STOBS RGYAL 1990: 1; JAMGÖN KONGTRUL LODRÖ TAYE 2012: 312, 805 n.725; DIEMBERGER AND DIEMBERGER 2019: 241–242.

48 The structure of this myth is somewhat reminiscent of other traditional narratives pertaining to Tibetan agropastoral life like, for instance, the gift of agriculture to the primaeval tribes of Tibet; see LAURENT 2015.

49 According to biological veterinary knowledge, the gestation period for horses is 320 to 370 days counting from the first day of mating, with an average gestation period of 340 days or eleven months.

50 On the traditional typology of Tibetan horses, see MAURER 2019: 220.

animals to a life of servitude as mounts and beasts of burden. Although several passages of this narrative are difficult to interpret, it is worth noting the setting of the story. From the time of conception until their domestication, the first Tibetan horses portrayed in this narrative evolved in the wild, nurturing area surrounding Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in West Tibet.

Additionally, the archaeological findings from West Tibet highlight the significance of horses for local communities as early as 500 BCE. Mark Aldenderfer observes that the skeletal remains of horses found in mortuary sites are indicative of a "growing social and political complexity across the plateau", as well as the development of new forms of religious beliefs and practices that predated the introduction of Buddhism.[51] The ritual sacrifice of horses, among other animals, along with the display of funerary objects in tombs attest to some degree to the status and prestige of the deceased.

The discovery of disarticulated equids and horse heads in Western Tibetan burials appears to be strongly reminiscent of human funeral rituals described in Old Tibetan manuscripts dating to the 9th-11th centuries. In his magisterial essay *Du récit au rituel*, Tibetologist Rolf Alfred Stein pointed out the sacred alliance (*tha chigs*; *mna'*) between men and horses in life or in death.[52] The favourite and closest animals (*spo ma nye du*) to the deceased were therefore sacrificed and buried with the dead. Honouring its pledge, the horse as psychopomp would escort the departed to the afterlife. According to the *Testament of Ba* (*sba bzhed*, *dba' bzhed*), animal sacrifices persisted until the 8th century when the Tibetan Emperor Khri Srong-lde-btsan eventually prohibited the killing of horses and cattle at funerals, attesting to the growing hold of Buddhist ideas.[53]

With the advent of Buddhism on the plateau, Guge and Spiti became pivotal regions for the dissemination of religious ideas and vernacular knowledge from the Indian sub-continent. Around the turn of the first millennium, the Tibetan rulers of a newly established kingdom spreading from North-western Nepal to Ladakh engineered a vast movement of religious patronage and translation activities. This cultural revival would soon be referred to as 'the later dissemination of Buddhism' (*bstan pa phyi dar*) by Tibet's own historians. During this time, the most famous treatise on Indian hippology, the *Aśvāyurveda* ascribed to Śālihotra, was translated into Tibetan by the renowned translator Rin-chen bzang-po (958–1055) with the assistance of the

51 ALDENDERFER 2013.
52 STEIN 1971.
53 PASANG WANGDU AND DIEMBERGER 2000: 62.

Indian Ācārya Dharmaśribhadra and Buddhaśrīśānti.[54] Importantly, the colophon of the Tibetan editions specifies that the translation of this work had been explicitly and personally requested by the ruler of West Tibet bKra-shis lha-lde btsan, better known as King lHa-lde (996–1024).

Likewise, the western Tibetan royalty was keen on establishing Buddhist temples across the realm. In 996, for instance, King Ye-shes-'od (947–1019/24) founded a monastic centre at Tabo in the Spiti Valley. The location of these monasteries, argues art historian Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, must have been chosen in accordance with a network of trading routes connecting the Western Himalayas to North-western India and Central Asia.[55] As such, the settlement of Tabo with its monastic facilities may well have served as a relay station and local trade emporium on the route followed by merchants, Buddhist monks, and artisans travelling between Kashmir and West Tibet. As a waypoint, Tabo would have provided water, food, and fodder to these travellers and their mounts.

In this context, some researchers have seen in the toponym Tabo (*rta pho, ta pho, ta po*) a possible reference to 'male horses' or 'stallions' (*rta pho*). This possibility has been put forward, on the one hand, due to the discovery of early inscriptions near Tabo mentioning horses (*rta cog*) and horse owners (*rta cog pa*), according to Laxam S. Thakur.[56] The etymological reading of the place name Tabo as 'male horse' is also endorsed by Lahauli scholar Tobdan, based on his reading of a Buddhist legend. According to local lore, the horse of dPal-gyi rdo-rje from Lhalung, the famous Buddhist monk who assassinated the Tibetan King Langdarma in 842, refused to leave the lowland surrounding the Tabo settlement.[57]

Finally, and as far as the local tradition of Spiti is concerned, Tibetologist Namgyal Henry reports another legend according to which the earliest king of Spiti had a passion for Chamurti horses. For that reason, this Hindu Raja was named Aśvapati or the Lord of horses

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[54] On the Tibetan translation of Śālihotra's *Aśvāyurveda* (*rta yi tshe'i rigs byed*) by the great editor and translator (*zhu chen gyi lo tsā ba*) Rin-chen bzang-po, see BLONDEAU 1972: 12–110.

[55] KLIMBURG-SALTER 1982; KLIMBURG-SALTER 1997.

[56] THAKUR 2000.

[57] This story is encapsulated in the following Tibetan verse: *lha lung dpal gi rdo rje ri la phyin kyang / rta pho'i zhabs yang dang yang thang la bzhag*; "Although dPal-gyi rdo-rje from Lhalung went uphill, his stallion's hooves did not want to leave the plain". There is little historical basis for this narrative which conflates dPal-gyi rdo-rje's clan name (*lha lung*) from Central Tibet with the place name Lhalung in Spiti. This narrative, remarks Tobdan, is an attempt by the people of Spiti to explain why the Lhalung settlement is topographically situated uphill while Tabo (i.e. the horse) is located on the plain; see TOBDAN 2015.

(*rta'i bdag po*).[58]

While it is essential to approach the interpretation of these narratives with caution, it is worth highlighting that horses occupied an important place in the collective imagination of the inhabitants of the Western Himalayas. Archaeological evidence indicates a longstanding relationship between these people and horses dating back to the first millennium BCE. Used for transportation and herding, horses became an integral part of agropastoral communities' daily life; a role also reflected in the ritual killing of these animals at human funerals. With the development of more complex forms of social and political organisation, horses grew in importance as valuable means of communication, trade, and warfare. It is difficult to imagine what the Buddhist kingdom established in West Tibet in the mid-10th century would have been without these animals. Reflecting on that period, a 15th-century chronicle titled the *Royal Succession of Ngari* (*mnga' ris rgyal rabs*) reports several instances where horses were bestowed upon clerics in return for Buddhist teachings or obtained as tribute. In addition to their economic value, the royalty of West Tibet also elevated horsemanship to a patriotic aptitude in the service of one's country and religion:

> All lay people and clerics have to protect the stability of the Buddhist doctrine. Henceforth, one must show deference to the teachings and commentaries recently acquired as well as [respect] all ordained clerics and people of great knowledge. In case medicine, weapons and the like are not available here, they must be brought from elsewhere. All monks and lay persons ought to protect West Tibet against depredation caused by border tribes. All laymen must learn how to shoot arrows, run, jump, exercise, swim, ride a horse, write, read, count; all things athletic men [should do]. Moreover, one must all learn how to be strong and courageous.[59]

In addition to the development of Buddhist ideas, the above passage underlines that vernacular knowledge was imported from foreign lands when deemed necessary. Given the central importance of horses, it is understandable that King lHa-lde sought to acquire more

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[58] HENRY 2016: 28.

[59] *skya ser thams cad kyis chos skor brtan por bsrung ba dang / phyin chad bka' dang bstan chos gsar du song ba dang / mang du thos pa dang / sdom brtson thams cad kyis bkur ba dang / sman dang go cha la sogs pa 'dir med na / gzhan nas 'tshol ba dang / mnga' ris mtha' mi god par ban skya thams cad kyis bsrung ba dang / skye bo rnams kyis mda' dang / bang dang / mchongs dang/ spyad kyi stangs dang / skyal dang / rta skya dang / 'bris dang / klog dang / rtsis te pho gyad sna dgu dang / gzhan yang dpa' rtsal thams cad slob pa dang /*; for a different translation of this passage, see VITALI 1996: 55, 110–111.

knowledge on the subject of hippology and hippiatry, thereby requesting the translation of the *Aśvāyurveda* into Tibetan.

In this particular context, the name of some localities seems to have preserved the memory of places tied to horse rearing. While the origin of the place name Tabo (*rta pho*; 'horse male') in Spiti may remain beyond reach, social anthropologists Yancen and Hildegard Diemberger report other toponyms relating to horses such as Taling (*rta gling*; 'horse country') near Lake Manasarovar and Talung (*rta lung*; 'horse valley') located further south.[60] Stressing the contribution of members of the royal house of West Tibet to horse knowledge in the 9th-10th centuries, the two anthropologists are led to conclude, "the vast nomadic pasture lands in the Kailash area at the heart of the Zhang Zhung kingdom may have offered an ideal ground to develop horsemanship and the building of horse breeding skills (…) any polity that stretched over the vast territory loosely indicated as Zhang Zhung would have been strongly dependent on horses".[61]

3. The Dangkhar settlement: stable master, horse rearing, and stallions

Diplomatic correspondence exchanged between the chancery of the rNam-rgyal dynasty of Ladakh and the local government of Spiti is informative insofar as horse breeding in the Western Himalayas is concerned. From 1630 to 1846, the rNam-rgyal dynasty ruled over Spiti except for twenty-four years during which the border valley was controlled from afar by the Tibetan government (1684–1708). Throughout this period, the settlement of Dangkhar (*brag mkhar*, *brag dkar*, *brang mkhar*) assumed the function of political centre or capital (*rgyal sa*) of Spiti.[62] Established on top of vertiginous cliffs, a district fort (*mkhar rdzong*) housed the local government and administrative headquarters of the valley (Fig.3). A fort prefect (*mkhar dpon*) appointed by the royal house of Ladakh, or one of its offshoots, travelled to Spiti only periodically. During the rest of the year, a bevy of local officials and functionaries supervised current affairs.

60 DIEMBERGER AND DIEMBERGER 2019: 247.
61 *Ibid.*
62 LAURENT 2023.

Figure 3 – Dangkhar: the former capital of Spiti. 1) The district fortress 2) The Geluk monastery of Lagope (now Dangkhar Tashi Chöling) 3) The Upper Temple 4) The Bheda's house. Drawing: Carmen Auer and the author, 2018 (based on Samuel Bournes'1866 photograph).

Information about equestrian activities and structures at Dangkhar is rarely forthcoming. There is, however, ample evidence that an area bordering the Dangkhar Lake served as a race track in the 19th century (Fig.4). Horse races were widely popular among the landed gentry of Spiti and were often commented upon by foreign observers. [63] Egerton's *Journal of a Tour through Spiti to the Frontier of Chinese Thibet* provides a colourful description of one of these events:

> July 29th. The Nono invited us to some horse-races, and provided a number of ponies for us and our servants. The race-course was the dry bed of a small lake about 800 yards in circumference. We were preceded on our way there by a cavalry band, making the most discordant noise. The first thing our Spiti friends did was to seat themselves in a comfortable place, protected from the wind by a low wall, and commenced drinking châng. The Nono and his immediate guests and retainers were served from a private vessel, resembling a huge brass teapot; whilst liquor for the *hoi polloi* was kept in a small mussuck (cured goat-skin). Having gone on drinking till we exhibited symptoms of impatience, some of the 'swells,' including the Nono's eldest son and a few of the more

[63] GERARD 1841: 149–150; MOORCROFT AND TREBECK 1841: 2: 76; EGERTON 1864: 22–23; LYALL 1874: 203; WILSON 1875: 244–245.

distinguished villagers, performed a dance to the sound of a flageolet and kettle-drums. This dancing was the most ludicrous thing I ever saw, not excepting the races that succeeded (…) After this the racing (!) began – everybody starting where he liked, pushing his wretched pony to a gallop and coming in anywhere. The rider leans quite over the pony's head (so that if declared to win by a nose, it must be the rider's and not the pony's nose), and keeps himself in that position by holding the bridle with both hands close to the bit. As the Nono's son was riding a course, the bridle broke, and down he came on the ground, and the same thing occurred to another. Their dignity was a good deal hurt, as they pique themselves on their riding (and really do stick on well), and elaborate explanations were entered into to show me that if the bridle had not broken, it could not have occurred. The saddles and bridles are neater and better put together than I could have expected in that wild region. The iron-work in particular is good, and they use the buckle and tongue, which has not yet made its way into Hindoostan. After the paces of the ponies had been exhibited, a newspaper was stuck up as a mark on a little heap of earth, and then they all tried to hit this paper, riding past best pace, one with a matchlock loaded with shots, another with bow and arrow, and a third with a sword. One had a pistol which declined to go off. Some of the ponies thought the newspaper dangerous, and objected to go near it, bolting mid-course. All this was gone through time after time in the most solemn way, the actors evidently believing that they were making a very imposing martial display, whilst the utter inefficiency of the weapons, the diminutiveness of the ponies, and the pace they went (about half as fast as a man could run), with great bellies full of grass, combined to render it a most ridiculous exhibition. I tried in vain to photograph them.[64]

[64] EGERTON 1864: 22–23.

Figure 4 – A group of Spiti horses with foals on the shore of the Dangkhar Lake in Spiti. Photo: the author, 2011.

To date, the earliest historical source pertaining to Spiti horses and Dangkhar comes from the Sakya monastery of Tengyu (*steng rgyud*). This document, first published by Tibetologists Jörg Heimbel and Dieter Schuh, has been identified as a copy of a royal charter (*phyag rgya*) issued by the King of Ladakh Nyi-ma rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1694–1729) in 1720. The purpose of this copy was to confirm the legal dispositions of a lost charter, which had been initially granted by the King of Zanskar bDe-mchog rnam-rgyal between 1647 and 1684.[65] To this end, Nyi-ma rnam-rgyal's document is addressed *pro forma* to the 'fort prefect of the province of Spiti' (*spyi ti khul gyi mkhar dpon*) and to the other members of the local government. Among these officials is a 'head groom' or 'stable master' (*chibs dpon*). The prerogatives of this functionary of lower rank are not known with precision. It is very likely that the stable master was in charge of looking after horses used by governmental officials, envoys and messengers who, upon presentation of a travel permit (*lam yig*), would have been able to obtain fodder or even a fresh mount.[66] In 1822, George Trebeck reported a "yard close to the fort" that may have served as a horse

[65] See document sTeng-rgyud 1f in SCHUH 2019: 51–55.

[66] On horse transportation and postal services in Tibet from the 13th to the 20th century, see MAURER 2019–20.

enclosure according to my local informants.[67] The position of stable master was maintained at least until the first half of the 19th century, as demonstrated by its appearance in a royal order (*bka'*) issued to the government of Spiti by the King of Ladakh Tshe-dpal don-grub rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1802–1840) in 1818.[68] This position was probably made redundant after British India took control of the valley, and thereupon reduced the local government of Spiti to only two offices: that of the valley headman (*rgya pa*), known as the Nono, and that of his assistant and registrar (*ta go che*, *do ga che*), retitled as *paṭwārī* by the British administration.

The 1720 charter also draws attention to horse rearing (*chibs gsos*), albeit in a legal context. Primarily concerned with the monastic properties and obligations of Tengyu Monastery, the document validated the removal of tax burden (*khral thebs*) from the monastery. Accordingly, Tengyu, the Sakya institution of the Spiti Valley, had been exempted from "obligations such as horse rearing, goats and sheep rearing, and the guarding of the fort".[69] These dispositions seem to suggest that previously, particular duties had been owed towards the local government of Spiti. In effect, the tenants of monastic estates attached to Tengyu Monastery were thus relieved from having to defend the seat of the government or to provide labour and agricultural products towards state husbandry.

The intervention of the state in matters of horse breeding may be established on the basis of a document dated 1748. Following the death of Nyi-ma rnam-rgyal, the Kingdom of Ladakh was divided between his two sons: bDe-skyong rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1729–1739) kept Ladakh while his half-brother bKra-shis rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1734–1758) inherited Purig and Spiti. According to a royal decree studied by Schuh, King bKra-shis rnam rgyal attempted to regulate the export of Spiti horses.[70]

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[67] MOORCROFT AND TREBECK 1841: 2: 76. As for non-governmental horses, a written agreement drawn up at an unknown date by the local monastery specifies that water and fodder could also be obtained from the monastic estate (*bla brang*) as there was no provisions for unloading and storing the freight of packhorses; see BmK26 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 180–81.

[68] The notification (*promulagatio*) of this document reads as follows: *pyi ti mkhar dpon / grong dpon / gnyer pa / do kha che / rgad po / bcu dpon / chibs dpon / mdor na / rgan mgo yod dmangs bcas la springs pa /*; "This is addressed to the prefect of the fort of Spiti, the village headman, the steward, the Do-kha-che, the elders, the leader of ten, the stable master, in short to all those holding public offices"; see document BmK02 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 139–41.

[69] *chibs gsos / ra lug gi gsos / mkhar srung sogs khral thebs rigs*; see document sTeng-rgyud 1f in SCHUH 2019: 51–55.

[70] The king of Purig was not the only Asian ruler to regulate the sale of horses. The Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1542–1605) also restricted the export of horses from his country unless a royal permit was obtained from the royal court; see POUR 2013: 130.

Indeed, the document stipulates that the sale of any stallions was contingent upon approval by the district resident of the fort (*rdzong sdod*).[71] In spite of its brevity and the specific reference to horses, the 1748 charter was mostly concerned with rising tension between Spiti and the princely state of Bashahr-Kinnaur; with good reason as the latter launched an attack on Spiti the following year. It is possible therefore that bKra-shis rnam-rgyal's intention was to protect the country's herd by imposing trade restrictions with neighbouring states. Overall, the Spiti Valley had little economic value to the rNam-rgyal dynasty. Beyond taxes, horses represented wealth and authority. The interest in horses on the part of Asian rulers, as we will see, was far from insignificant. In any event, the King of Purig had a complicated relationship with these animals which fuelled tensions with Ladakh.[72] Following his death in 1758, the Spiti Valley was returned to the Kingdom of Ladakh. As a result, observed Joseph Gergan (1878–1946), "the entire wealth of King bKra-shis rnam-rgyal, the many *dkar rgya* from Spiti, and the stallions of this country, were all taken away without exception".[73] Prior to that, however, the King of Purig would rule about Spiti horses once more, this time to control the castration of said stallions.

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[71] *de lhag pho rta tshong rgyu byed na yang/ rdzong sdod las bris ba byes nas ma rtogs tshong rgyu yang man cing*; "Moreover, if stallions are for sale, they cannot be sold unless a request was made to the district resident of the fort". The district resident may have been the fort prefect himself or a local official acting on his behalf; see document No-no 14 in SCHUH 2016: 174–176.

[72] A bitter rivalry between bKra-shis rnam-rgyal and his nephew Phun-tshogs rnam-rgyal (r.1739–1753) concerning Spiti's political status led to the Treaty of Hanle (*wam le*) signed in 1753. As a result of these negotiations, the King of Purig was also forced to return more than two thirds of his herds of horses to the King of Ladakh; see SCHIEWGER 1997; SCHWIEGER 1999.

[73] *rgyal po bkra shis rnam rgyal rgyi nor rdzas thabs cad dang spyi ti'i dkar rgya rnams dang yul de'i pho rta gcig kyang ma bor bar gtsang dag 'khor*; GERGAN 1976: 478. It is not clear what sources did Gergan use here. Moreover, the phrase *dkar rgya rnams* is not easily understandable. The use of the plural particle *rnams* is highly indicative of a great number of countable units. As a colour, the term *dkar rgya* could perhaps refer to the pale pink coat of horses. It is of interest that the word *rgya* is also used for a three-year-old horse in Eastern Tibet. Unfortunately, none of my informants could confirm a similar usage in their respective region. I wish to thank Dieter Schuh, Lochen Tulku Rinpoche, Kachen Lobsang Duskor, and Tsetan Nymgyal for their comments and suggestions.

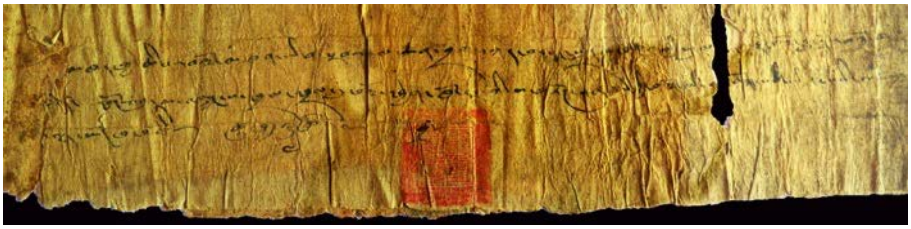

Figure 5 – A confirmation letter of privileges issued by the King of Purig in 1753. Local archives (BmK25) of Dangkhar Tashi Chöling in Spiti. Photo: the author, 2016.

4. The Bheda's pony: horse castration in Spiti

As discussed earlier, the practice of castration can be explained by the requirements of horse husbandry. It facilitated the management of herds and perhaps also secured the economic interests of breeders. Geldings were generally preferred to stallions and mares as they were easier to work with and more suited to Himalayan style of life. Although the traditional chirurgical procedure is not precisely known, archival records draw attention to the social dimension connected to horse castration in Spiti. As we will see below, the terminology used is often imprecise and the meaning of these documents is revealed by a comparison with other available sources.

The first document of interest belongs to the monastic archives of Dangkhar Tashi Chöling (Fig.5). Taking the form of an oblong folio, a three line-long confirmation letter of privileges (*gyab gnon*) is authenticated by the impression of a large seal belonging once again to the King of Purig bKra-shis rnam-rgyal. Although partly illegible, the document reads as follows:

> *Narratio*
> [1] Since he is the horse maker of the fort, this is addressed to the people of Dangkhar of the land (…) to make horse (…) [2] in particular when it must be made urgently (…)
> *Dispositio*
> Apart from him, no one else is permitted to carry out [this work].
> [3] Let it be done!
> *Eschatocol*
> Issued on the (…) of the 4th month in the Water-Bird Year [1753].
> (seal)[74]

[74] [1] *mkhar gyi chibs bzo mkhan yin stabs la chan brag dkar bar dang springs bcas kyi yul* (…) *rta bzo rgyu* (…) *bzo ga* [2] (…) *sgos su ma 'gyang par 'phral 'phral du bzo phyin kho rang gi ma gtogs gzhan gyi bzo mi chog pa yin pa'i* (…) [3] *de ltar yong ba gyis // chu bya zla 4 tshes* (…) (seal) *bris* /. For a critical edition of this text, see document BmK25 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 178–79.

Dated 1753, this work permit effectively recognised the right of an unnamed individual to 'make horses' (*rta bzo rgyu*). However vague the phrase is, the use of the Tibetan verb *bzo* is clearly indicative of physical labour and manual work. Furthermore, the present document underscores two essential facts. Firstly, this particular line of work was explicitly connected to the district fort of the valley and, as such, it may have been understood as a governmental position. Secondly, and as a consequence of the previous point, this legal document prevented anyone else from carrying the task granted to 'the horse maker of the fort' (*mkhar gyi chibs bzo mkhan*).

Following the annexation of the Spiti Valley by the British in the 19th century, a similar matter was once again brought to the attention of local authorities, now the Raj. To this end, a new work permit was granted in 1851 (Fig.6). Also preserved in the Dangkhar archives, this bilingual Farsi-Tibetan document was authenticated by apposition of the seal of the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu.[75] A tentative translation of the first half of this text reads:[76]

> (…) the district town of Dange,[77]
> [As for] the works which ought to be completed (…) Nono *kārdār*.[78]
> You are hereby granted a licence to carry out these works which will be done by all of you as in the past.
> You shall uphold this order and ensure all [appropriate actions] for this area.
> [As of] 1851.[79]

Written in Tibetan, the second half of this document does not appear to be an exact translation from one language to another. It does bring some clarity about the nature of this work permit and more importantly about the recipient's identity. It reads as follows:

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[75] The seal is written in Farsi in the centre and in Devanagari script, with due phonetic changes, circling around the rim. It reads: "Muhr Kachahari Asistant Kamishanar Saheb Bahadur Kulu Iswi 1849"; "Seal of the Office of Assistant Commissioner [of] Kulu [dated] 1849". I wish to thank Shailendra Bhandare from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, for his assistance in the study of this seal; see document BmK11 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 155–56.

[76] I am very grateful to Najam-ur-Rashid from the University of the Punjab, Pakistan, for helping with the translation of this document; see document BmK11 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 155–56.

[77] In other words, the settlement (*nāgar*) of Dangkhar.

[78] A Persian noun used for the office of an alderman or a bailiff. The term *kārdār* is here equivalent to the Tibetan title 'headman' (*rgya pa*) who, under British rule, was simply called 'Nono' (*no no*).

[79] The date is given in Arabic numerals (i.e. ١٨٥١)

Narratio
[1] The present Bheda 'Byor-rgyas of Dangkhar was in charge of horses (*rta grid*) [2] for the five *kothīs* already in former times. Accordingly, [the monastery of] Lago[pe] granted favours [3] through the intermediary of the *hisāb*.[80]
Dispositio et sanctio
[4] Whosoever was to ignore this statement, [be it a member of] the laity or the clergy, [5] let it be understood that they will be prosecuted. Nobody, from Lari upward to Losar downward, [6] shall claim the right of the Bheda of Dangkhar for [the duration of] an aeon.[81]

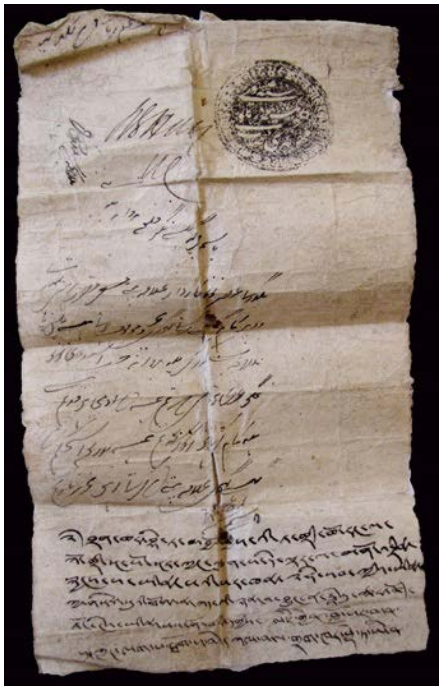

Figure 6 – Work permit issued by the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, William Edmund Hay, in 1851. Local archives (BmK11) of Dangkhar Tashi Chöling, Spiti. Photo: the author, 2011.

[80] The Geluk monastery of Lagope (*la go spel*, *legs sgo spe*, *lags spel* etc.) now known as Dangkhar Tashi Chöling. If understood correctly, the Hindustani word *hisāb* (*he sab*), meaning account, is used here to designate the treasurer (*phyag mdzod*) of the monastery.

[81] [1] *brag khar bhe ta 'byor rgyas 'di rta grid kho rang la* [2] *ko gri lnga po sngar kyang 'dug pa de ltar la mgo drin* [3] *bskyang pas yin pa'i bar mkhan he sab kyis yin* [4] *skya ser sus thog na skad 'di nyan ma byung na rjes su rtsad gcod* [5] *'ong nges yin pas go bar bgyis / la ri gyen blo sar man* [6] *sus kyang lag pa thog sa med bskal ba la grag khar bhe ta yin /*; for a critical edition of this text, see document BmK11 in LAURENT 2023: 2: 155–56.

Issued by the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu in 1851, this work permit was delivered to Spiti through the intermediary of the valley headman Nono bsKal-bzang, who was in effect a spokesperson for the British—if not their stooge—in the mid-19th century.[82] The recipient of this document was a man from Dangkhar named 'Byor-rgyas. Preceding his name, the patronymic Bheda (*bhe ta*) designated a social class, rather than a paternal filiation as we shall see below. Given the lack of spelling exactness that often characterizes archival records, the reading of the Tibetan term describing his line of work (*rta grid**) is more problematic. Did the scribe mean to write 'horses and mules' (*rta drel*), 'to lead or bring horses' (*rta 'khral*), or instead a compounded noun such as 'horse and knife' (*rta gri*) to designate castration procedure? What is certain is that 'Byor-rgyas was the only individual officially allowed to exercise this activity, whatever it was, within the five administrative units of the Spiti Valley (*tshug so*, *koṭhī*).[83] To make that point absolutely clear, the document also stresses that nobody inhabiting the territory comprised between Lari and Losar, two settlements which formed the southern and northern boundaries of the valley, shall claim the right of the Bheda 'Byor-rgyas from Dangkhar.

The work relation between this man and horses can be clarified through colonial sources. In 1851, the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu was none other than the Major Hay who was cited above vis-à-vis Spiti horses. Further in the same piece, Hay observes:

> But little attention, except in a few cases, is paid to the breeding of these Ghoonts; a certain number of entire Ghoonts are turned loose amongst the mares, and the sire of a foal is seldom known. Such as are not required for breeding, are castrated when between two and three years of age. The right of castration has usually been the right of one person given under a seal from Ladak.[84]

Published 1850, Hay's *Report on the Valley of Spiti* suggests that the Scottish officer was approached by the Dangkhar Bheda as early as 1847 when he was appointed Assistant Commissioner of Kulu. The reference to the seal from Ladakh is sufficiently specific to assume that Hay had been presented with a document very similar to bKra-shis

82 EGERTON 1864: 57–58; LAURENT 2023.

83 In the mid-19th century, British officials used the word *koṭhī*, a Hindustani term that originally designated a granary or a warehouse, to refer to an administrative unit (*tshug so*) from which taxes were levied.

84 HAY 1850: 441.

rnam-rgyal's 1753 work permit, if not the very same one. In fact, it was quite common for the British to be asked to confirm the rights and privileges previously bestowed upon Spiti individuals by the rNam-rgyal dynasty through sealed documents.[85] In any event, Hay's observation sheds significant light on the two work permits issued in 1753 and 1851. It confirms that the Bheda household of the Dangkhar settlement was indeed granted the exclusive right to castrate stallions and produce geldings—literally 'to make horses' (*rta bzo*)—for the whole Spiti Valley.

This fact was also later reported, albeit obliquely, by Gergan in his *Description of Spiti* (*spyi ti sgo gsum gyi skor gleng ba*) written in the 1920s.[86] Describing patrilineages and clan names, the Ladakhi-Tibetan scholar remarked:

> The Bhedas are the 'grooms' (*rta bco mkhan*) of the people of Spiti. It is said that the blacksmiths of Dangkhar are from the family lineage wearing a conch shell earring. Accordingly, there are more than thirty-six kinds of 'bone lineages' in Spiti.[87]

Here again, the Tibetan term *rta bco mkhan* used to describe the Bhedas' occupational activity lacks precision and does not correspond exactly to 'groom' (*rta rdzi*, *rta g.yog*). It may derive from the noun for a two-year-old colt (*bco pa*); an appropriate age for an animal to be gelded, as observed by Hay. Alternatively, the term could come from the verb 'to make', 'to perform', or 'to treat illness' (*bco*), in which case it would have more or less the same meaning as the 'maker of horses' (*chibs bzo mkhan*). Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the Bhedas from Dangkhar were working with horses on behalf of the Spiti people.

The Tibetan sources discussed above draw attention to a hitherto unknown aspect of the social history of the Western Himalayas. Socio-anthropological works have generally insisted upon the fact that Bhedas were traditional musicians and entertainers.[88] It is generally

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85 EGERTON 1864: 28–29, LYALL 1874: 186.

86 Gergan's *Treasure of Immortality: The Royal Succession of Ladakh* (*la dwags rgyal rabs 'chi med gter*) contains a chapter on Spiti with information gathered during his visits to the valley; see GERGAN 1976: 320–329. Elena de Rossi Filibeck has looked into Gergan's description of Spiti and gives a partial translation of this text in English; see DE ROSSI FILIBECK 2002.

87 */spyi ti pa rta bco mkhan be dā yin no/ dung gi sna lo can [36] gyi brgyud las brang mkhar gyi mgar ba de yin zer ro/ de ltar spyi ti na rus sna so drug las lhag par yod shag/*; GEGAN 1976: 325. The numbering used by Gergan, given above in brackets, indicates that the Bheda families were not counted by the author as a formal patrilineage of Spiti; see LAURENT 2023: 1: 88.

88 On the origin, function, and discrimination of Bheda communities in Ladakh and Spiti; see TREWIN 1995: 166–167, 180–181; RATHER 1997; TASHI TSERING 2014: 58–64; ZIMMERMANN 2014.

assumed that they made their first appearance in the Western Himalayas in the 17th century as court musicians (*mkhar mon*). To this day, Bhedas are known for playing musical instruments, whose forms and corresponding names are highly indicative of cultural influences from the Islamic-Iranian world.[89] Likewise, the noun Bheda itself may also attest to the foreign origin and low social status of this group.[90]

As a social category, Bhedas are found in Spiti, Lahaul, and in Ladakh. Traditionally considered as outsiders (*phyi pa*), the Bhedas have constituted a partially outcast and endogamous group. Until recently, the members of this community were referred to as 'vile and disreputable' (*ma rabs*) by their neighbours. Colonial sources report that there were forty-six Bhedas in Spiti in the 1860s.[91] This figure suggests that the Bheda community comprised no more than eight households, of which there was one in the valley capital of Dangkhar. British official Lyall also recorded the local saying "Bheda no land, the dog no load", thus underscoring that these households did not own agricultural land and had therefore no social obligations (i.e. payment of tax, corvée labour) and therefore very few rights at the village level.[92] Since the members of the Bheda community did not cultivate fields, they made a living by playing music at weddings, festivals, and ceremonies.

In this particular context, it begs the question as to how the Bheda household from Dangkhar managed to secure an alternative source of income. A heated dispute involving Bheda women provides possible answers while simultaneously drawing attention to the importance of horses for their household. In the summer of 1863, the Deputy Commissioner of Kangra Philip Egerton reported an altercation caused by an act of defilement relating to the use of a smoking pipe by

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89 These musical instruments comprise two types of percussion known as 'dawu' and 'daman' in Spiti. The first one is a tambourine that resembles the Iranian frame drum (*daf*). The second instrument likely derived its name from the Persian bowl-shaped drum (*damameh*). Finally, a type of oboe known as 'surna' must be related to the Persian word *sorna*, a woodwind instrument with a double reed played across the Indian subcontinent.

90 The term Bheda could come from the Sanskrit word for 'difference', 'rupture', or 'violation' (*bheda*), but more likely, given the Persian origins of the names of their musical instruments, is a derivation from the Persian word for 'low born', 'ill mannered', or 'something new or strange' (*beda-at*). Whatever the donor language, the multiple spelling variants recorded in Tibetan, the most common forms being *be da*, *be dha*, and *bhe da* to name just a few, underscore the non-Tibetan origin of this word.

91 LYALL 1874: 198.

92 LYALL 1874: 199. Tashi Tsering gives a slightly different version of this axiom: "Dogs have no load, Bhedas have no tax" (*khyi la 'gel med / be da la khral med*); see TASHI TSERING 2014: 171, 216.

two Bheda women from Dangkhar:

> The complainants were musicians, who stated their case thus: – At an evening party two of them asked some blacksmiths to let them have a smoke at their pipes. The blacksmiths refused, saying that the musicians were *low caste*. The musicians snatched a pipe and smoked it. There was a slight scuffle, and the blacksmiths caught it rather severely from the *tongues* of the female musicians. A few days after, the blacksmiths (…) held a conclave, and resolved to vindicate their outraged dignity. Accordingly they assembled to the number of about eighty, attacked the musicians' house, plundered everything in their possession, and took two of them, the original aggressors, captive, and held them hostages for good behaviour. Defendants allowed the correctness, of this statement, even to the detail of plundered property, which (including as it did *one item of seven horses*), [93] I had thought exaggerated. They asserted that the musicians were *low caste*, and that they could not smoke pipes with them (…) I convicted the whole lot, comprising forty blacksmiths and two musicians, and sentenced them to one month's imprisonment and two rupees fine each, awarding compensation to the plundered parties out of the fine (…) A petition was put in afterwards by the blacksmiths, coolly requesting me to declare that the musicians are of low caste, and are never again to smoke a blacksmith's pipe! Of course I snubbed them, for I should be sorry if the curse of caste should become firmly rooted here. (…) There is, however, no doubt that the musicians of Spiti are a different race from most of the Zemindars or landowners, as the annexed photograph will show.[94]

The claims put forward against these women and the violent reprisal conducted against their household are highly indicative of Spiti's social stratification. In effect, both blacksmiths and Bhedas were considered partially outcast groups. They belonged to what is commonly termed as an 'inferior class' (*smad rigs*) in traditional Tibetan and Himalayan societies, and as such were perceived as forming an 'unclean or polluted social stratum' (*rigs btsog pa*). Between the two groups, however, the Bhedas ranked lower and essentially occupied the bottom of the social scale in Spiti. Social interactions between members of different groups required the observance of taboos to avoid the risk of ritual pollution, including the avoidance of sexual relations with a member an unclean household, adherence to seating protocols, and the avoidance of the 'mixing of mouth' (*kha yum*

[93] The emphasis is mine.
[94] EGERTON 1864: 27–28.

zas, *kha bsres pa*). [95] In accordance with the last socio-cultural proscription, Bhedas were strictly prohibited from using dishware and utensils belonging to people outside their community. Having wilfully violated this custom, the use of the blacksmiths' pipe by the two Bheda women was thus perceived as a severe act of contamination (*grib*). The ritual pollution associated with inferior classes, in addition to being hereditary, was directly related to particular social groups whose menial work was considered problematic, if not improper, according to Buddhist beliefs. These works included occupational activities such as the butchering of animals, funeral labour (i.e. corpse cutting), metal working, and petty animal trade. In light of the above, it is therefore easy to understand that the castration of horses would have been restricted to a member of an unclean and polluted class. The physical procedure not only required the mutilation and suffering of the animal, but could also cause the spilling of blood and potentially even the death of the gelding should postoperative complications arise.

With regard to this incident, it should also be noted that the aggrieved party is said to have taken seven horses from the Bheda family. This detail of the case is particularly relevant for the present investigation. As noted earlier, data retrieved from colonial sources clearly indicate that the principal landowners of Spiti did not have more than one or two horses per household in the 19th century. It is therefore highly improbable that the Dangkhar Bhedas would have possessed seven animals solely for their personal pleasure. These animals were not their property but must have been entrusted to this household to be gelded. Without this work, they would have had no source of income other than music.[96] Observations made in Eastern Tibet, as we have seen, highlights that new geldings must remain standing for a month following castration, with training resuming ten days after their operation. In this way, the Dangkhar Bhedas would have had several animals under their care, despite Egerton's disbelief.

The perceived pollution resulting from the castration of horses was

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[95] Blacksmiths and Bhedas were compelled to occupy seating positions (*gral rim*) reflective of their inferior status at formal group gatherings; often on the floor itself and at the end of the row (*gral mjug*) usually by the door. On social stratification, casteism, and pollution in Tibet, see UGEN GOMBO 1983; FJELD 2003.

[96] A possible reference to the dual professional activity of the Dangkhar Bheda can perhaps be inferred from a short article about Spiti by diplomatic historian Alastair Lamb. The identification of the 'entertainers and animal doctors' as Bhedas rests, as it should, on the proper use of the Oxford comma, or the lack thereof: "The majority of the villagers are landless. Some are junior members of landholding families who work in the fields for their keep. Others are labourers paid in kind. In each village there are specialists, such as the blacksmiths, millers, entertainers and animal doctors, who are kept by the community in return for their services"; see LAMB 1956: 249–250.

directly experienced by veterinary sergeant William Moorcroft (1767–1825) on his way to Ladakh. In the 1820s, Moorcroft travelled from Sultanpur in India to Bukhara in Central Asia in search of horse breeding stock. Having left the Himalayan foothills, his party reached the valley of Lahaul when the following event took place:

> 12th [August 1820] We were obliged to stop here all day as some of our loads did not come up till very late–two of the pittoos belonging to our party had been very troublesome and were castrated.[97]
>
> 13th [August] It had rained hard all night and till midday and this was imputed by the natives to our having violated the sanctity of the place by the operation just mentioned–However one of our accusers was observed slyly to carry off the offending parts which had been left on the ground and passing across the rivulet in which it was pictured that he was about to throw them without having so done and having taken his prize to his house it was presumed that he meant to expiate the offence by a broil.[98]

Lahaul is the adjacent valley to Spiti, and today the two form the Indian district of Lahaul-Spiti. As might be expected, the two share many socio-cultural features and thus Moorcroft's account can be considered indicative of the seriousness with which the pollution imputed by castration was taken in the region.[99] Notions of pollution and defilement were widely prevalent in traditional Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Risks of pollution linked to particular activities were therefore real for individuals and communities alike, bearing various consequences ranging from human diseases to natural disasters—including the torrential rain imputed to Moorcroft's decision to castrate his packhorses. In her insightful research on horses in Mustang, anthropologist Sienna Craig remarks on how a traditional physician named Malaya was believed to carry a lot of defilement

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97 The term 'pittoos', from the Nepalese word for a person's or animal's back (*piṭhyū*), was used by extension for 'a porter' or 'a packhorse'.

98 Moorcroft, William. *7th Fasciculus of Journal from July 28th to August 16th*. Mss.Eur.D242. British Library: London. 105r.23–105v.11. I wish to thank David G.K. Taylor for his kind help in unscrambling Moorcroft's journal entries.

99 Regarding the subject of horses, British officer Lyall observed that "horse-racing and shooting with the long bow are amusements common to both Láhoul and Spiti, and are practiced at meetings held at particular seasons. Prizes are given at the races, and the rider of the last horse is subject to a good deal of ridicule and practical joking. The target at an archery meeting consists generally of a pillar of snow with a leaf for a bull's eye. The archers excite themselves by treating the pillar as an effigy of some traditional tyrant, and cry out 'let the Rana of Ghúsa [i.e. the queen of Lahaul (*gar zha*)] have it in the goitre,' or 'give the Kárdang naplang one in the eye.' Stake of cash or grain are shot for"; see LYALL 1874: 203.

(*grib*) on account of all the animals he treated. Interestingly enough, one of Craig's informants also reports the rumour that Malaya knew how to perform horse castration.[100] Hence the removal of a stallion's genitalia must have been broadly equated to a polluting act not unlike butchering work in many places across the Himalayas. As such the castration of horses fell within the purview of inferior and unclean members of the society. In Spiti, this function was assumed by a family of Bheda musicians who lived in Dangkhar, the capital of the valley. Unlike the other members of their community, the Dangkhar Bhedas secured a second source of income when their household was granted the exclusive right to geld studs in 1753. A century later, following the formal takeover of the region by British India in 1846, the same family approached the new authorities and saw their prerogatives reconfirmed by means of a new work permit delivered in 1851.

Moorcroft's investigation into the breeding of horses in India also draws attention to an interesting parallel social arrangement. [101] Following a decline in the breeding industry of Rohilkhand in what is today Uttar Pradesh, the members of a caste of Hindu troubadours and musicians called Bhāṭ were mandated by the local Indo-Afghan ruler Ḥāfiẓ Rahmat Khān (1749–1774) to oversee the distribution of stallions to local landholders. This caste, explains historian Jos Gommans, took studs to the *zamīndār*'s stables where they let the stallions cover the mares against remuneration.[102] There is no indication, however, that the Bhāṭs of Rohilkhand would also perform castration.

The production of geldings by the Dangkhar Bhedas constitutes only one piece of a broader puzzle. Horse castration therefore harks back to the availability of stallions in Spiti, and to the circulation of Spiti horses outside the valley, both regulated post 1748.

5. Horse tribute and war booty

If the development of horse trade in the Western Himalayas is difficult to trace, it is my contention that it must reflect to some degree the establishment of powerful empires (e.g. Mughal, Qing, Sikh, and British India) with their ever-increasing need for horses.[103] Military conflicts, in particular, created a substantial demand for these animals. Priding themselves on their royal stables, rulers often encouraged domestic breeding but still remained dependent on the supply of Central Eurasian warhorses. Discussed in the previous sections, extant

[100] CRAIG 2008: 83, 88.
[101] MOORCROFT 1862: 46–48; GOMMANS 1994: 242–243.
[102] GOMMANS 1994: 242–243.
[103] GOMMANS 2007; CHOUDHARY 2019.

sources and legal documents show that Western Tibetan monarchs were no exception, keeping horse matters under close scrutiny, whether by promoting horsemanship and hippiatric knowledge in the 11th century or through reliance upon horse services, royal herds, and regulations in the 18th-19th centuries. The rise to power of the rNam-rgyal dynasty of Ladakh and the political history of Spiti provide further evidence concerning breeding and trade in the Western Himalayas.

Wedged between Tibet on one side and the Indian subcontinent on the other, the Spiti Valley often bore the brunt of the expanding territorial ambitions and vested economic interests of its immediate neighbours. After its incorporation into the Kingdom of Ladakh in 1630, the people of Spiti were compelled to pay governmental taxes to the subsequent monarchs of rNam-rgyal dynasty. From 1708 onward, however, Spiti also contributed ecclesiastical dues in kind to the Geluk monasteries of West Tibet, in accordance with the separation of jurisdictional powers negotiated between Tibet and Ladakh. Meanwhile, the neighbouring hill states of Kulu and Bashahr-Kinnaur also coveted the border valley and rarely missed an opportunity to enter Spiti, desecrating buildings and plundering the valley for its horses and cattle.[104] According to French botanist Victor Vincelas Jacquemont (1801–1832), who toured the Spiti Valley in 1830, Spiti was thus bound to the payment of small tributes to manage its neighbours' propensity for military interventions:

> Spiti has no Raja of its own but it pays a small tribute to all bordering states. Thus, every three years, it sends to the Raja of Bashahr four horses, twenty blankets etc.; in the same way to the Chinese resident in Garou;[105] to the Raja of Kulu, and probably more to the Raja of Ladakh. A decade ago, it was looted by two viziers from Kulu (…) the first vizier of Bashahr also invaded this district some fifty years ago, and even occupied the Fort for two years (…) These wars were not conducted for any purpose other than that of looting, mainly the capture of cattle, and generally ended without bloodshed.[106]

Whilst Tibetan sources are generally silent about the payment of tributes to Kulu and Bashahr, colonial reports on the other hand

[104] Troops from Kulu entered Spiti in 1686 and again around 1821. Bashahr-Kinnaur launched a first offensive against Spiti in 1749/50 and is reported to have occupied the capital Dangkhar for two years in the 1760s or 70s during which the monastery of the capital was heavily damaged; see LAURENT 2023: 1: 131, 160.

[105] The 'Chinese resident of Garou' was in fact the Tibetan governor of Gartok in West Tibet.

[106] The translation is mine. For the original in French, see JACQUEMONT 1841: 2: 353.

suggest that it was a common practice in the first half of the 19th century. The ceremonial offering of horses, in particular, appeared to have been a required gesture on the part of a vassal polity. Hay's report on Spiti is here again informative in this respect:

> In the years 1844-45 and 46, the annual revenue paid to the Thánádár at Ladak was 1,031 rupees. Besides this, 100 'Múndís' or iron crow-bars; likewise two Goonts, and a nazaráná of 15 rupees annually to the Thánádár, and 60 sheep in jugat.[107]
>
> During these three years the Seiks are said to have further plundered the country of 4,000 rupees, also 60 Ghoonts, and much other property.
>
> From 1839 to 1843, both inclusive, an annual revenue of 2,000 rupees was paid to Rájá Goláb Singh.[108] Besides this, 100 sheep within the five years; and, in 1839, three Ghoonts were presented as nazzars, and one Ghoont annually for the four succeeding years.
>
> Before 1839 the revenues from time within memory, was always pad to the Rájá of ladak, as follows; 396 rupees in cash, 200 lacs of grain, 100 múndís, 34 pieces of cloth (Barmúr), and 132 shúgús of paper, equal to 660 Hindustáni táktehs.[109]

To bestow horses upon ruling monarchs was a long-established practice in the Western Himalayas. In the second half of the 16th century, the Kingdom of Guge in West Tibet is reported to have sent a horse annually to the king of Ladakh Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal as tribute.[110] Likewise, the wall-paintings of a small temple in Dangkhar

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[107] The Urdu terms 'nazaráná' (*nazrā'nah*) and 'nazzar' (*naz'ar*) derive from the Persian word for a 'solemn vow or promise' (*nazr*). It designates an offering or a fee made to the state or to its representative.

[108] The Dogra ruler Gulab Singh (1792–1857) annexed Kulu and Spiti, more or less in the name of his Sikh overlord Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), in 1841. Under the leadership of his general Zorawar Singh (1786–1841), the Dogra forces had invaded Ladakh in 1834, Baltistan in 1839, and West Tibet in 1841. These military campaigns eventually led to the waning of the rNam-rgyal dynasty of Ladakh and the annexation of Spiti by British India.

[109] HAY 1850: 438.

[110] *de nas sprul pa'i rgyal po tshe dbang rnam rgyal de rgyal srid la mnga' gsol nas/ sku na gzhon dus dmag mdzad pas/ shar ngam ring man chad/ blo bo dang/ pu hrangs/ gu ge la sogs pa mnga' 'od tu bsdus/ lho phyogs ''dzum lang/ nyung ti gnyis/ nub phyogs she dkar dang/ kha dkar tshun chod mnga' 'od tu bsdus/ byang hor la dmag rgyab gsung ba la/ nub ra sa rnams kyis zhu ba phul nas/ ma mdzad/ gzhan de rnams kyi jo kun dang/ ngan med pa'i bka' byas gte pa la khyongs/ mkhar rnams la sku tshab bzhag nas/ mar yul thams cad dar zhing rgyas pa yin no/ gu ge nas khral dang dpyad 'bul ba la/ lo re la gser zho gsum brgya/ dngul dang/ tsher mo brgya dang/ chibs gcig/*; "Thereafter, the divine King Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal ascended the throne of the kingdom and waged war while he was in his youth. In the East, he brought [the district of] Ngam ring along with Mustang, Purang, Guge and so on under his control. In the South, he annexed

demonstrate the tributary relationship that Spiti held to the royal court of Ladakh. I have argued elsewhere that this edifice was commissioned by the King of Ladakh Nyi-ma rnam-rgyal in the first half of the 18th century.[111] A socio-historical analysis of a donor tableau sheds significant light on the subordinate status assumed by the Spiti Valley at the time. The panel displays a royal banquet and consecration scene led by the Ladakhi monarch and his Drukpa court chaplain (Fig.7). This formal ceremonial gathering includes other members of the nobility, servants, musicians, and dancers. The right side of this panel, however, departs from the conventional mode of depiction of similar donor tableaux and consecration scenes. Instead, the panel shows the arrival of a convoy, announced by two musicians (Fig.8). The party is composed of four mules carrying heavy bags and bales of fabric. These animals are being escorted by foot soldiers with swords and standard-like spears. The main figure of this convoy is riding a white horse. Behind him, and closing the scene, is another infantry soldier leading a horse.

Bearing little relation to traditional donor tableaux, this last scene may be read as a political statement on the part of the rNam-rgyal dynasty. It was a visual reminder of Spiti's status within the Kingdom of Ladakh. As such, the people of this vassal province were subject to the payment of revenues collected annually by the fort prefect. These governmental taxes were mostly levied in kind in the form of grains and would typically have corresponded to the content of the bags carried by the mules. But colonial sources also mention other items such as cloth and blankets, just as the painting depicts.

'Dzum lang and Kulu. In the West, he conquered She dkar and Kha dkar. He expressed [the intention] to wage war against the Mongols in the north (i.e. Eastern Chagatai Khanate), but as the people of Nubra petitioned him, he desisted. Thanks to words devoid of malice, all the rulers (*jo*) of the other [lands] were brought to swear allegiance. Emissaries were stationed in their forts and the whole [Ladakh] Maryul flourished. Taxes and tributes were received from Guge [amounting to] three hundred golden coins, silver, one hundred young sheep, and a horse per year"; see *La dwags rgyal rabs* 1987: 48–49.

[111] LAURENT 2014; LAURENT 2023: 1: 134–40.

Figure 7 – The consecration scene and royal banquet of the Upper Temple in Dangkhar, Spiti. Photo: the author, 2011.

Most noticeable, however, is the gift of a horse to the king, the patron of this temple (Fig.9). Compared to the white mount ridden by the central figure of the convoy, the horse being pulled by a soldier appears to be a colt. Smaller in size, its head seems to resist and its gait looks jumpy, as the soldier's arms are stretched out to hold it. The colt's red coat may have been a deliberate choice on the parts of the painters, if not the patron himself. In her work on horses and social status, Tibetologist Petra Maurer recalls that the best horse for a king is the one suitable for warfare. According to the *Aśvāyurveda* and its 11th-century Tibetan translation, a red horse, as a symbol of kingship, would befit a monarch to rule the world.[112]

Figure 8 – Convoy with armed escorts bringing Spiti's tribute to the King of Ladakh. Upper Temple of Dangkhar, Spiti. Photo: the author, 2011.

[112] MAURER 2019: 214,

Figure 9 – The offering of a Spiti colt to the royal court of Ladakh. Upper Temple of Dangkhar, Spiti. Photo: the author, 2016.

Spiti horses, as both Jacquemont's and Hay's accounts attest, were not only presented as a sign of fealty, but were also forcibly taken as war booty. These two aspects, namely horse tribute and horse looting, may well have been the underlying principles for the circulation of these animals in the Western Himalayas. Ladakhi rulers, for instance, were eager to acquire horses and expanded their royal herds at any costs. According to the *Royal Succession of Ladakh* (*la dwags rgyal rabs*), one of the early monarchs of the rNam-rgyal dynasty named bKras-shis rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1555–1575) is said to have brought back large numbers of horses following his conquests:

> At the time reigned King bKra-shis rnam-rgyal. This king, having brought under his dominions all the regions from upper Purig down to Droshö [in Tibet], returned with herds of horses in inconceivable numbers. He established the fortress of Namgyel Tsemo in Leh and the urban suburb of Chubi.[113]

Similarly, the Ladakhi chronicle reports on King Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal's (r.*c.*1753–1782) distinctive obsession with foreign horses:

> His actions and doings were astonishing and unprecedented. Each of his five hundred *tibicag* horses had a head groom, a

[113] *de'i dus su / rgyal po bkra shis rnam rgyal gyis rgyal srid mdzad do / rgyal po des pu rig gyen chad / gro shod man chad mnga' 'og tu bsdus nas / rta khyu bsam gyis mi khyab pa khyongs / sku mkhar slel rnam rgyal rtse mo dang / chu bhi 'i grong khyer btab /*; see LA DWAGS RGYAL RABS 1987: 47.

> chamber silver bowl and so on to stretch out their gait. The legs of the *tibicag*, the secret parts,[114] and the like were paid much attention to.[115]

The name of this horse breed, given as *tibicag* in the text, originates from a breed called *tōbčāq* in Turkic languages.[116] Turkologist and Altaist Gerhard Doerfer observed that the noun *tōbčāq* is a diminutive deriving from the word 'bullet' (*top*).[117] It characterises a fine breed of fat horses, with large and round flanks. Already familiar to Ilkhanate Mongols in the 14th century, these animals seem to have originated from Central Asia.[118] During the Mughal period (16th-19th centuries), these horses became practically synonymous with the conception of a highly trained military mount. Azad Choudhury remarks that the term *tipuchag* was used to describe equestrian training techniques and military drills received by warhorses in the imperial stables.[119] According to Mughal sources, horses trained in *tipuchag* were highly prized war booty and deemed particularly appropriate for gift-exchanges (*nazr*) between rulers and subjects. These notions likely translated to Tibet around the same period.

By the time of the Ladakh-Tibet-Mughal War (1679–1684), the trained bullet-like *tibicag* mounts had acquired a reputation as chargers. Like in Mughal India, *tibicag* warhorses were used

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[114] Modern commentators have been at odds over the meaning of the word 'secret' or 'hidden' (*gsang*) in this passage. Francke proposed to translate it as 'genitals' which, he believed, might have been used for divination; see FRANCKE 1926: 122. Petech, however, understood the term *gsang* as referring to 'food' provided a spelling emendation (*bsang*), presumably on account of a rather uncommon Tibetan noun for 'food' or 'fare' (*bsang bu*). It is my opinion that the term 'secret' may indeed refer, albeit euphemistically, to the horses' genitalia in accordance with many Tibetan compounded nouns such as 'secret bag' or 'scrotum' (*gsang sgro*) and 'secret water' or 'urine' (*gsang chab*) to name just a couple. This passage would therefore highlight that in Ladakh, as was customary in other parts of Asia, that Central Eurasian horses were used as warhorses as well as for crossbreeding. This would explain why stable masters were required to pay much attention to the legs, genitalia, and other body parts in order to select the most promising individuals. On warhorses and trade in Asia; see GOMMANS 1994; GOMMANS 2007.

[115] *phyag las sogs sngar med pa'i ya mtshan dang / chibs pa ti bi chag lnga brgya re la chibs dpon dang / gzims ting sogs 'gros che ba / ti bi chag gi zhabs thams cad dang / gsang sogs la rtsi ba shag che ba byung nas* /; see LA DWAGS RGYAL RABS 1987: 69.

[116] PETECH 1977: 115.

[117] DOERFER 1965: 601–603.

[118] In her study of the *Compendium of Chronicles* (*Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh*) by historian Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭabīb (1247–1318), D. G. Maitland Muller notes that the word *tōbčāq* was used for 'horses of the west' (*aspān-i tobčag*; *tobiča'ut*); see MAITLAND MULLER 1957: 39, 211, 250; DOERFER 1965: 601–603.

[119] CHOUDHARY 2019: 74.

specifically for battle by the kings of Ladakh. Tibetan sources recall, for example, that when the Tibetan troops defeated the Ladakhi armies at Basgo in 1683, "even the *tibicag* horses, which are renown as powerful (*stobs po che*) and supreme steeds (*rta mchog*), were taken as a reward of bravery" by the victors.[120] It is not clear, however, who rode these warhorses. The Ladakhi cavalry (*rta'i dpung*) was, in theory at least, formed by the members of a conscripted militia who owned their own, presumably indigenous, mounts.[121]

In any event, it is generally believed that Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal's unmitigated passion for *tibicag* horses accompanied his conversion to Islam, which led ultimately to his abdication under public and politic pressure. In his *Treasure of Immortality: The Royal Succession of Ladakh*, Gergan provides the following account:

> It all started when Mirza Malik presented a *tibicag*. As one or two *tibicag* [horses] were brought every year without interruption, [the king] became infatuated with *tibicag*. With his behaviour being influenced by Mirza Malik, he converted to the sole views of Islam but maintained the appearance of a Buddhist devotee.[122]
>
> Since King Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal adhered to Shia Islam, he even took the name Mohamed Akbar Khan. During three years, there were no offerings of butter lamps to the major and secondary [chapels] of the palace, but presents were made to the *tibicag* [horses] instead.[123]
>
> (…) all [parties] came to the palace of Leh and rose against the king. King Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal received Sarbu and many lands from Matho for the *tibicag*. As a final ruling was pronounced, the king abdicated and the realm was entrusted to the prince. It is said that King Tshe-dbang rnam-rgyal had five hundred *tibicag* [horses].[124]

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120 *ti pi cag tu grags pa'i rta mchog stobs po che dag kyang dpa' mtshan du blangs*; see MDO MKHAR BA TSHE RING DBANG RGYAL 1981: 1: 40; PETECH 1947: 33.

121 PETECH 1977:160.

122 *mir za ma lig gis ti bi cag gcig phul ba las 'go zugs te / lo re bzhin ti bi cag gcig gnyis re 'khyong rgyun ma chag pa dang / ti bi cag la thugs steng che ba mdzad de mir za ma lig gi spyod pa'i rjes su 'brangs nas / nang pa sangs rgyas kyi chos phyi tshul du byed pa ma gtogs don du mu sul chos lugs 'dzin pa'i lta spyod kho na'i dbang du gyur bas/*; see GERGAN 1976: 476.

123 *rgyal po tshe dbang rnam rgyal mu sul mān shi'a chos lugs la brten nas mtshan du'ang mha mad aka bad khan btags nas lo gsum mkhar gyi lhag chung sogs kyi mchod me med par byas nas ti bi chag la de'i tshab phul*; GERGAN 1976: 480.

124 *(…) thams cad gle mkhar du lhags nas rgyal por ngo log nas/ rgyal po tshe dbang rnam rgyal la ti bi chag bcas 'bos 'gros ba'i sa zhing mang sprod nas mang ba dang sa bu bcas nas 'phul te bcad khra btsan po bcas nas rgyal po khri las phab ste de'i sras la rgyal srid gtad // rgyal po tshe dbang la ti bi chag lnga brgya yod skad /*; GERGAN 1976: 481.

In spite of the king's whims, the prestige of the foreign *tobčaq* breed never waned and it has remained associated with Ladakh royalty, particularly in the context of ceremonial music. Until recently, processional music (*rgyal po'i 'phebs rnga*) performed by court musicians (*mkhar mon*) included melodies called *tibicag* to accompany the king's horse procession.[125]

It would thus appear that the kings of Ladakh maintained a strong interest in the rearing of specific horse breeds, a commitment that persisted until the kingdom's downfall in the mid-19th century. Documents issued by the royal house of Ladakh over the decade from 1834 to 1844 shed light on a specific husbandry experiment. According to Schuh's study of these archives, an experienced man from Purig named Ali Hussain (*'a li hu sen*) was put in charge of rearing a group of five horses.[126] These animals were to be trained, evaluated, and removed from the farm if necessary. What captures our attention is the origin of these horses: one from Purig, another from Zanskar, two horses from Baltistan, and what is believed to be a Mughal stud (*mu 'gul pa*).[127] The absence of the Spiti horse is particularly notable.

6. The trade in Spiti horses in the Western Himalayas

Few rulers of the rNam-rgyal dynasty seem to have taken an interest in Spiti horses, based on current available sources. By all accounts, the King of Purig bKra-shis rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1734–1758) was the only member of this dynasty to leave concrete written evidence of his involvement with the horse breeding culture of Spiti. We have seen, however, that during the reign of King Nyi-ma rnam-rgyal (r.*c.*1694–1729), bKra-shis rnam rgyal's father, the provision of horses for government officials and their upkeep was one of the duties expected of Spiti. These steeds were kept at the district fort of the capital and put under the responsibility of a stable master. While still in Dangkhar, the painting program of the upper temple offers visual evidence that Spiti horses were also given as gifts to the court of Ladakh. King bKra-shis rnam-rgyal, on the other hand, actively engaged with the regulation of horse breeding in Spiti. Placing the sale of stallions under the purview of the local government in 1748, he then limited the production of geldings to the prerogatives of a single household of the

[125] As ethnomusicologist Trewin notes: "The first of the three *ti-bi-cag* signals indicating the king's movements would then be played as the king dismounted, the second as he passed through the gate, and the third as he arrived in the inner hall where the festivities were to be held"; see TREWIN 1995: 262, 322, 402.

[126] SCHUH 2018: 159–168.

[127] *Ibid.*

capital in 1753. On account of the nature of these two documents, these measures must have applied to all horse owners of Spiti and likely aimed to regulate the export of this breed beyond the king's jurisdiction. Like Mughal India, there is ground to believe that Ladakhi rulers sought to import Central Eurasian horses to supplement their royal stables and cavalry, perhaps through crossbreeding efforts.

Notwithstanding these facts, nothing is known about the trade in Spiti horses until the 19th century. It was the newly appointed Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, Hay, who once again drew attention to the sale of these animals in the Himalayan territories annexed by British India. Yet the detail of this trade looks far from impressive:

> The Spiti people are not essentially traders, their country affords but little pasturage, and they seldom have more sheep than to supply their own wants. The exports are confined to grain and a few Ghoonts, together with a few manufacture blankets, and pieces of Barmúr cloth (…) [the Tibetans] are their own carriers: they come to Spiti in November, and take about 1,000 lacs of grain, and a few Ghoonts (…) [The Spiti people] export to Busáhir 250 lacs of grain (…) a few Ghoonts are also sold.[128]

Judging from the above, the trade in Spiti horses was still in its infancy in the mid-19th century, with a few animals being exported to the hill state of Bashahr-Kinnaur under British control and a few more sold to Western Tibetan traders. These Himalayan ponies, observed Major Hay, "were chiefly bred for sale" by the Spiti people; a trade that he estimated to be worth about 400 rupees in 1849. This sum represented less than a dozen animals based on colonial knowledge that the price of a good Spiti horse ranged from fifty to hundred rupees at the time.[129] This source of income obviously did not comprise the bartering of horses in exchange of goods between the Spiti people and their neighbours. At the exact same time, the Bhedas of the capital were confirmed in their official position as gelding agents thanks to Hay's work permit, attesting perhaps to the vitality of horse breeding at a domestic level. In spite of his mixed assessment, the Assistant Commissioner seems to have seen an opportunity to supply proper mounts to his government, concluding that "the breed of Ghoonts with a little care might be considerably improved".[130]

The British obsession with horse breeding in India began at the end of the 18th century when the East India Company found herself at a

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[128] HAY 1850: 439.
[129] See *supra* note 26.
[130] HAY 1850: 441.

significant military disadvantage. The constant demand and high prices commanded by Central Asian warhorses stimulated the breeding economy of the Indian sub-continent. Drastic measures were taken in order to increase the size of the Bengal cavalry, which grew twelvefold in less than two decades.[131] In 1793, the East India Company established a stud breeding farm at Pusa in Bihar. The 'Pusa Experiment' as it came to be known had two objectives: to produce large and suitable mounts for the British cavalry on the one hand, and to improve local horse breeds on the other.[132] Despite some improvement, "the total British cavalry force", notes Gommans, "was still inferior to the massive cavalry contingents of the native states".[133] Unable to provide sufficient cavalry remounts, the farm managed to supply good animals to British officials nonetheless by tapping into regional markets. Amid growing criticism against the stud operations, veterinary surgeon William Moorcroft was called in in 1808.[134] In spite of his expertise, breeding efforts continued to fail to supply a sufficient number of warhorses. To redress the situation, Moorcroft proposed a horse-buying mission to Central Asia in order to acquire bigger, bonier horses to improve quality of the stud. As mentioned earlier, his expedition took him to Ladakh, where he sojourned from 1820 to 1822, before proceeding towards Bukhara. If his journey is generally considered a commercial failure, it is nevertheless hard to overestimate the importance of British breeding activities for the development of horse trade in Asia in the first half of the 19th century.

This period also coincided with the expansion of British influence and the systematic exploration of the Western Himalayas by the military officers of the East India Company. In 1816, the hill territories of Kumaon, Garwhal, and Bashahr-Kinnaur were ceded to the Company giving Britain a direct border with Tibet for the first time. In 1846, the three contiguous valleys of Kulu, Lahaul, Spiti were formally annexed, opening up the Indo-Tibetan border regions of the Western Himalayas to intense foreign scrutiny. Observations made about Himalayan ponies in Spiti were echoed in other parts of these borderlands. The Assistant Commissioner of Kumaon George William Traill (1792–1847), for instance, underlined the reliability of these horses while reporting on an increase in the selling price of these animals due to a growing demand:

> The horses in use here, are small stout ponies of Tartar breed, called "Gúnts:" these animals are remarkably sure-footed, and

131 GOMMANS 1994: 236.
132 ALDER 1979.
133 *Ibid*.
134 On the life of William Moorcroft, see ALDER 1985.

> consequently, well adapted for the rocky and precipitous roads of the hills; they have the further merit of not requiring shoes, and are invariably ridden unshod. The price has, of late years, been much enhanced by the demand of European gentlemen; a poney of good qualifications not being procurable for less than from sixty to one hundred rupees, near treble the former rates.[135]

Traill's report published in 1832 shows that a want for high-altitude mounts may well have impacted the local economy, resulting in a sharp rise of prices. In effect, military officers, officials, missionaries, natural scientists, idle travellers, and hunting parties started to pour down the Himalayan trails, often relying on large numbers of attendants, porters, and ponies during their tours of British Himalayan territories. In the early 1860s, Egerton remarked that the Spiti people exported "a good number of ponies" with Lyall highlighting that "they sell some in Basáhir and a few in Kulu, but the great traffic is with the neighbouring Tibetan province of Chamarthi".[136] In addition to the territories under British rule, West Tibet was perhaps the most important trading destination for the sale of Himalayan ponies. Travelling alongside the region of Chumurti, the Deputy Commissioner of Almora Charles Atmore Sherring noted during his 1905 journey in West Tibet:

> The distance from Gartok to Rudok is only a matter of some eight to ten days: there is a large population there, barley is cultivated and there is an abundance of salt, while the surrounding country is famous for its horses, which always acquit themselves well at the annual horse-races at Gartok, and invariably fetch a high price in the market.[137]

The district settlement of Gartok was thus renowned for its horse races and annual fair.[138] Apart from this, a regular military force of two

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135 TRAILL 1832: 14.

136 EGERTON 1964: 51; LYALL 1874: 196.

137 SHERRING 1906: 157.

138 According to interviews conducted among Ladakhi traders by historian Janet Rizvi in the 1980s, Gartok had been the biggest of all the markets in western Tibet: "Gartok was the rendez-vous of traders from a wide area – Lahul, Spiti, Kulu and Manali, as well as Ladakh, from where there were Baltis, Shamma and Arghon bringing not only provisions to sell to the Chang-pa, but also a variety of goods from Yarkand. Others came from as far as Lhasa itself (…) There were hillmen from the southern flank of the Himalaya, from Nainital and Almora, bringing cloth from India, and many kinds of livestock – horses, sheep, goats, yak, *dzo*; the Chang-pa also brought sheep and goat, yak and *dimo*. The gathering lasted two or three months, and Tonyot Shah estimates that every year 10,000 to 12,000 men must have assembled there, so that the whole plain was covered with their tents"; see RIZVI 1999: 80.

hundred horses is said to have been stationed at Gartok on behalf of the Tibetan government.[139] To explore the demand for horses in West Tibet would take this study too far. Suffice to note that the trade in Spiti horses on a transregional level, as reflected in colonial sources, must have been essentially a 19th-century development.

Conclusion

Contrary to expectations, the Spiti pony or Chamurti horse is perhaps more famous and commands a higher price now than it ever did in the past, courtesy of tourism and the oddities of the modern horse trade and its particular interest in provenance (Fig.10). As this article has demonstrated, the pre-modern trade in Spiti horses was mostly local, and it can be hypothesized to have been primarily a barter trade. The market took off with the arrival of the British and other European interests in the early 19th century, for whom the use of these 'ships of cold desert' was both practical and connected to their strategic concerns in the Himalayas. Although the trade in Spiti horses was probably largely unrecorded in previous periods, the breeding of horses was nonetheless an important aspect of the socio-economic life of this border valley. If these animals may not have had much following outside Spiti itself, the gelding of stallions and the position of the Dangkhar Bhedas only make sense if the circulation of Spiti horses pre-existed the 19th century. Indeed, regulatory dispositions vis-à-vis the sale of stallions and the production of geldings had first been established by the King of Purig in the mid-18th century.

Figure 10 – A group of Spiti ponies or Chamurti horses grazing in the hills above Dangkhar, Spiti. Photo: the author 2011.

[139] TRAILLS 1832: 46.

A review of Tibetan sources pertaining to the rNam-rgyal dynasty is informative in this regard. It underscores the centrality of horses of all breeds for the royal houses of Ladakh and Purig in the 18th–19th centuries. These monarchs, like other Asian rulers, were partial to supply steeds to their royal stables through trade, war booty, gifts, and possibly crossbreeding. They too seem to have favoured Central Eurasian mounts at a time where military conflicts and the demand for warhorses prompted long-distance trade and stimulated horse breeding across the Indian subcontinent and beyond.[140] Through the figure of the Bheda's pony, we were thus able to explore hitherto little known social structures, trading activities, and political relations particular to Spiti, which in many ways connected this remote Himalayan valley to some of the most important empires of Asia in the 18th–20th centuries.

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[140] GOMMANS 1994; GOMMANS 2007; POUR 2013; CHOUDHARY 2017; CHOUDHARY 2019.

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Appendix

Treatise on Horses titled The Silver-White Mirror

Chapter One
Introducing the father vulture

First, regarding the origin of horses: In [the region of] Mount Kailash, monkeys were frolicking hither and thither on the shores of Lake Manasarovar. From the edge of a lofty cliff, a monkey in heat was looking at the surroundings. A resplendent white bird, with its head held up high and wings spread wide, was gently hovering in the sky.[141] Having noticed [the bird], her desire grew even stronger. She quickly ran towards him, climbed onto the top of a rocky outcrop, and waited. The former, a beautiful bird, and the latter, the repugnant and defiled creature who had appeared, mated.

This is the first chapter introducing the father vulture.

Chapter Two
The tale about the father vulture and the mother monkey who spawned the horse breed

The next day at dusk, the monkey was looking from the rocky outcrop wondering whether yesterday's vulture would come again, but did not see the bird. She laid five eggs and placed them inside the horn of a wild yak.[142] They were left in the midst of grass during the three

[141] From this short literary description, it may well be that the father bird is a bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), also known as Lammergeier, rather than the more conventional Himalayan vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*). Usually seen floating along mountainside, this eagle-like vulture frequently measures over 1 meter from beak to tail, with a wingspan of nearly 3 meters. Unlike its cousin, the bearded vulture does not have a bald head. The body plumage is a mingled rusty and white, with a creamy-coloured forehead.

[142] It is difficult to assess the symbolic meaning and significance of the wild yak's horn in this story. As a possible line of approach, some legendary narratives reported in funerary rituals from the Old Tibetan manuscripts found at Dunhuang have a few points of similarity. In his analysis of the ritual function of the horse based on the Dunhuang documents, Rolf Alfred Stein examined a primordial feud between the horse and the wild yak (*'brong g.yag*) which resulted in the death of the former. Having been assigned different realms (*bskos*), the horse ventures into the wild yak's northern territory in search for grassland and water. For his transgression, the horse is gored by the wild yak and dies. The horse's youngest brother decides to avenge his death and forges a sacred alliance with man to do so. Henceforth, man will ride the horse in life or in death (i.e. the horse as psychopomp). Building on these reciprocal obligations, the youngest horse and man depart to the northern land where they hunt the wild yak down and kill him; see STEIN 1971: 485–491. By goring the (eldest) horse to death, the wild yak conversely causes the

autumn months. Despite the grass rocking them back and forth the eggs did not break. For that reason, [horses] must be guarded against [the dangers of] grass during the three autumn months. During the three winter months, she left them in a nesting crevice within a cliff. The eggs once again did not break. For that reason, a roof must be put over [horses] during the three winter months. During the three spring months, she left them on the shore of Lake Manasarovar. Here again, the eggs did not break. For that reason, [horses] must be kept away from water during the three spring months. Thereafter, she left them on the side of Mt Kailash during the three summer months. She left them for two months near a brook of glacier water running from the summit where various flowers and medicinal herbs grew. Yet again, the eggs did not break.

Having given up, the [mother monkey] departed for a forest in search for food. She encountered an ascetic who asked her where she was going. She recounted her story. He told her to stay for a few days and to eat the offering cakes he had discarded. She stayed there seven days. Then she went back to have a look. The horn had become bigger. She looked inside and saw that the eggs got bigger. The horn was almost filled. As she could not lift them, she left.

She waited for discarded dough cakes during seven days. Then she went to check again. The horn was swollen with cracks all over it. She looked inside and saw that the eggs filled [the horn] completely. She left once again as she could not lift them.

The next day she came to see at sunrise. The horn had cracked even more. Inside, the eggs were also cracked. One of them had produced manure. As she could neither lift them, nor was she able to move them, she left them on site. When she looked on the surface, a piece of the horn broke with a dry sound and fell off. The eggs hatched. Inside, five animals with different coats were screaming. At the sound and sight of these [creatures], the mother was struck with terror and fainted. Afterwards, she regained consciousness and looked around. She saw bodies with wobbly weak limbs swimming back and forth here and there. As they crossed the water many times, they strengthened. It is the poison of the horn that makes their legs weak and unsteady.[143]

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domestication of the (youngest) horse by man. Could it be that the horn in our narrative stands as a symbolic representation of the yak's killing? With its transformation from instrument of death to symbolic matrix, does the horn of the wild yak thus allow horses to grow in the wild in all safety until their final encounter with the ascetic and subsequent domestication by man?

[143] The compound noun 'horn poison' (*rwa dug*) may in fact be referring to a poisonous plant called *ra dug* in Tibetan. This plant is listed as one of the three poisons for horses in Pelliot Tibétain 1062; see BLONDEAU 1972: 212, n.62. There is no general consensus regarding the taxonomic status of this herbaceous plant. According to the *Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*, this dark blue poisonous flower

Hence, horses and yaks are inclined to be hostile. It turns out that swimming (bathing?) is needed.

This is the second chapter about how the father vulture and the mother monkey spawned the horse breed.

Chapter Three
The Five Types of Horses

Because the monkey was the mother of horses, she wanted to look after them. Because the father was a vulture, it turned out that a small hammer was required.

One [of the horses] was untainted with a white coat. The tail, mane, and four joints were bluish and faultless. The voice was strong and pleasant. It had a long and loud snorting. [The voice] had many tunes. This haughty [creature] is the heavenly white horse Gyiling.

Another one had a yellow coat. The melodious sound of its snorting was pleasant. This is the Dowa [breed].

Another one had a red coat. It had fine muscles. The tail and the mane were slightly inferior. It had a rough temperament. The neighing had a weak sound. This is the Rungu [breed].

Another one had a light blue coat tinged with yellow. The neighing had a short sound. This is the Möndro [breed].

This is the third chapter about the origin of the five types of horses.[144]

Chapter Four
How the sage cursed the horses

Thereafter, the mother monkey and the five horse siblings lived together. Having grown up, they galloped in the vicinity of the ascetic bringing havoc by bucking around. A hammer was produced to rein the horses in. The sage, infuriated, cursed them. May a cold iron bit be inserted in your mouth in order to steer the body! May you be equipped with a saddle on the back! May humans and gods ride you! May you be a pack animal for people! Having cursed them, horses were forced to carry human loads.

This is the truth of the fourth chapter about how [horses] were cursed.

(*ra dug pa*) is said to possess the same properties (*nus pa*) as the 'black aconite' (*bong nga nag po*). Aconites (*Aconitum spp.*) are highly toxic flowering plants with hood-shaped dark blue or purple flowers. They are ubiquitous to the mountainous regions of the northern hemisphere including Tibet and the Himalayas.

144 The description of the fifth and last breed is curiously missing.

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རྟ་གཞུང་དབུལ་དཀར་མེ་ལོང་བཞུགས་སོ།།[145]

ལེའུ་དང་པོ། ཚ་བྱ་རྐོད་ཡིན་བའི་སྒེང་གཞི།

དེ་ཡང་དང་པོ་རྟ་ཡི་འབྱུང་ཁུངས་ནི། གངས་ཏེ་མེ་དང་མཚོ་མ་དྲོས་བའི་འཁྲུལ་ན་སྤྲེའུ་རྣམས་རྩེ་ཞིང་བར་འཚོ་བྱེད་ཀྱིན་ཡོད་པ་ལ། སྤྲེའུ་གཅིག་ཚགས་པ་ལངས་ནས་བྱག་རྒྱང་རིང་མཐོན་པོ་ཞིག་ནས་ལྟ་བཞིན་ཡོད་པ་ལ། ནམ་མཁའ་ནས་བྱ་གཟུགས་དཀར་ལ་མཇེས་པ་མགོ་མཐོ་བ། གཡོག་རྒྱངས་རིང་བ་གཅིག་ལིང་ལིང་བྱེད་འདུག་པ་དེ་ལ་ཡིན་སོང་ནས་འདོད་པ་སྣ་ག་སྐྱེས་ཏེ། དེ་སྐྱོགས་སུ་སྡུར་བར་རྒྱགས་ནས་བྱག་མཐོན་པོ་ཞིག་གི་ཁར་ཕྱིན་ནས་བསྡད་པས། སྡར་གྱི་བྱ་ལེགས་པོ་དེ་དང་མི་འབྲ་བའི་སེམས་ཅན་དེ་མ་ཅན་ཞིག་འོངས་ནས་འདོད་པ་སྐྱེད་པས། ད་ནི་པ་བྱ་རྐོད་ཡིན་པའི་སྒེང་གཞིའི་ལེའུ་སྟེ་དང་པོའོ།། །།

ལེའུ་གཉིས་པ། ཚ་བྱ་རྐོད་དང་མ་སྤྲེལ་མར་རྟ་རིགས་བྱུང་ཚུལ།

དེའི་སང་པོད་ཀྱི་དུས་སུ་[146] སྤྲེའུ་མོས་ཁ་སང་གི་བྱ་དེ་འོང་ངམ་བསམ་ནས་བག་ཐོད་མཚོན་པོ་ནས་བལྟས་པས་བྱ་དེ་མ་མཐོང་། སྤོ་ང་ལྟ་སྐྱེས་བྱང་བས། དེ་འབྲོང་གི་ར་ཅོ་ཞིག་ཏུ་བཙུག་ནས་སྟོན་[147]རླ་གསུམ་རྟྭའི་གསེབ་ཏུ་བཞག་པས་རྟྭ་འཚུབ་ནས་སྤོ་ང་མ་བརྡོལ། སྟོན་རླ་གསུམ་རྟྭ་བསྡུང་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། དགུན་རླ་གསུམ་བག་གསེབ་ཀྱི་བྱ་སྐྱིབས་སུ་བཞག་པས། དེར་ཡང་སྤོ་ང་མ་བརྡོལ། དགུན་རླ་གསུམ་ཞེབས་མ་འགེབས་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། དབྱིད་རླ་གསུམ་མཚོ་མ་དྲོས་པའི་འཁམ་དུ་བཞག་པས་དེར་ཡང་སྤོ་ང་མ་བརྡོལ། དབྱིད་རླ་གསུམ་ཆུ་བསྡུད་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། དེ་ནས་དབྱར་རླ་གསུམ་གངས་ཏེ་མེའི་འཁམ་དུ་བཞག་པས། ཀུན་སྤྱ་ཚོགས་སྐྱེས་པའི་ཆུ་འཁམ་དེར་རླ་བ་གཉིས་བཞག་ཅེས་ཀང་ཟེར། ཁོང་ཀ་རེ། ཁོང་གང་ལ་འབྲོ་གསུངས། སྡར་གྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་རྟགས་བཤད། ཞག་འགའ་འབའ་གཏོར་རིལ་ཟ་ཡིན་སྟོད་གསུངས། དེར་ཞག་བདུན་བསྡད། དེར་ཡང་ལྟང་ཕྱིན་པས་ན། རྟ་ཅོ་དེ་ཆེ་རུ་སོང་འདུག་པའི་ནང་བལྟས་པས། སྤོ་ང་ཆེ་རུ་སོང་ནས། རྟ་ཅོ་ཁེངས་ལ་ཁད་འདུག བཏེགས་པས་མ་ཟེག་པར་ལོག་ཕྱིན་ནས། ཞག་བདུན་གཏོར་ཟན་ལ་སྐུག ཡང་ལྟ་རུ་ཕྱིན་པས་རྟ་ཅེ་དེ་སྟོས། སེང་ཁཡིག་ཡིག་ཆགས་འདུག ནང་དུ་བལྟས་པས་སྤོ་ངས་ཐག་ཁེངས་འདུག བཏེགས་པས་མ་ཟེག ཡང་ལོག་ཕྱིན། སང་ཉིཨ་ལ་ལྟ་རུ་ཕྱིན། རྟ་ཅོ་དེ་ཡང་ཡིག་ཡིག་ལ་གས་སོང་འདུག ནང་གི་སྤོ་ང་རྣམས་ཀྱང་གས་

145 YE SHES STOBS RGYAL 1990.
146 Sic, for *srod kyi dus su*; 'in the evening' or 'at dusk'?
147 Sic, for *ston*; 'autumn'.

ནས་ཞེག་ལ་ཁད་ལུད་དེ་བཏེགས་པས་མ་ཟེག སྐུལ་བར་ཡང་མ་ནུས་པར་རང་སར་བཞག་ནས། ལོགས་ཤིག་ཏུ་བལྟས་ཅ་ན། རྟ་ཅོ་དེའི་དུམ་ཞེག་ནས་ཚག་སྐུ་དང་བཅས་ཏེ་སིང་སིང་དུ་ཐོར། སྐོ་ང་རྣམས་བརྡོལ་བའི་ནང་ནས་སེམས་ཅན་སྐུ་མདོག་མི་འདྲ་སྐད་ཆེ་བ་ཞེག་འདུག་པ་ལྟ་རོང་ངེ་ཐོན་བྱུང་བས་འཇིགས་ཏེ་དུམ་གཅིག་བརྒྱལ། དེ་ནས་དྲན་པ་གསོས་པ་དང་བལྟས་བས། གཟུགས་གཡས་གཡོན་ཤར་ལག་ཀྱལ་ཀྱོལ་མོང་པ་རྣམས་ཚུ་ལ་བར་རྒྱལ་ཚུར་རྒྱལ་བརྒྱབ་པ་མཐོང་། ཚུ་མང་དུ་བརྒལ་བས་ནང་དྲག་ཀྱང་འདུག ཤར་ལག་ཀྱལ་ཀྱོལ་སོང་བ་དེ་ནུ་དུག་ཡིན། ཏ་དང་གཡག་ལས་ཀྱི་དབྱ་རུ་འགྲོ་བ་དང་ཚུ་བཤད་བྱེད་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། ཐ་བྱ་ཆོད་དང་མ་སྤྲེའུ་མར་ཏ་རིགས་བྱུང་བའི་ལེའུ་སྐེ་གཉིས་པའོ།། །།

ལེའུ་གསུམ་པ། ཏ་རིགས་ལྡར་དཔྱེ་བ།

སྤྲེའུ་ཏ་ཡི་ཐ་ཡིན་པས་སྤུང་བ་དགོས་པ་དང་། ཐ་བྱ་ཆོད་ཡིན་པས་ཞེའུ་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། གཅིག་ནི་སཤུ་མདོག་དཀར་ལ་དྲངས་པ། ཇ་རྡོག་དང་ཚེགས་བཞི་སྟོ་ལ་དྲངས་པ། སྐད་ཆེ་ལ་སྐྱན་པ། ཁྲོལ་རྒྱངས་ཆེ་བ་ལ། འཕྱུང་ཁུག་མང་བ། མགོ་འཐང་མཚོ་ས་དེ་ནི་ཀྱི་ཡིང་གནམ་ཏ་དཀར་ཡོ་ཡིན། གཅིག་ནི་མདོག་སེར་ལ། སྐད་དབྱངས་ཁྲོལ་ལ་སྐྱན་པ། དེ་ནི་འདོ་བ་ཡིན་ནོ། གཅིག་ནི་མདོག་དམར་བ། ཨ་བཟང་བ། རྡོ་རྗོག་ཅུང་ནང་བ། སྟོང་པ་རྩྭ་བ། སྐད་ཐ་འཚེར་བ་ཞེག་འདུག་པ་དེ་ནི་རྒྱ་ཏུ་ཡིན་ནོ། གཅིག་མདོག་སྟོ་སྐྱ་རུ་སེར་ཡོའི་མདངས་ཆགས་པ་ཞེག་འདུག་པ། སྐད་ཐུང་ལ་འཚེར་བ་དེ་ནི་མོན་ཐྲི་ཡིན་ནོ། ཏྲའི་རིགས་ལྟ་རུ་བྱུང་བའི་སྐེ་གསུམ་པའོ།། །།

ལེའུ་བཞི་པ། དང་སྲོང་གིས་ཏ་ལ་མདམོད་པ་གོང་བ།

དེ་ནས་ཏ་སྤུན་ལྟ་དང་མ་སྤྲེའུ་བཅས་པ་དེར་ཡོད་པ་ལ། ཆེར་སོང་ནས་དང་སྲོང་གི་ཚར་རྒྱགས་ཏེ། ཏ་ཡོངས་[148]གཏོར། ཏ་ལྷག་བང་ཚུལ་ཐོ་རྒྱབ་བྱས་པས། དང་སྲོང་ཁྲོས་ཏེ་དམོད་པ་གོང་ནས། ལུས་ཡོ་རྡོངས་པའི་དགོས་པ་རུ་ཁ་རུ་ལྷགས་གང་འདུག་པར་ཕོག རྒྱབ་ཏུ་སྐོ་སྟན་སྟོད་པར་ཕོག མི་བང་ལྟ་ཡིས་བཞོན་པར་ཕོག མིའི་འཁུར་ཡོ་བྱེད་པར་ཕོག་ཅས་དམོད་པ་གོང་བས། ཏ་ཡིས་མི་འཁུར་དགོས་པ་དེ་ནས་བྱུང་། ཞེས་བདེན་ཚོག་བྱས་པ་དམོད་པ་གོང་བའི་ལེའུ་སྟེ་བཞིན་བཞོ།། །།

[148] Sic, for *'phongs*; hind part of a horse back.