

## Reconnaissance of Ri bo bkra bzang The Seat of Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can

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**I**n April of 2002, I had the good fortune of visiting the monastery and mountain of Ri bo bkra bzang, the seat of the great treasure revealer (*gter ston*), Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru (circa 1337–1401/1409).<sup>\*</sup> Ri bo bkra bzang, an important place of pilgrimage (*gnas chen*), is situated about 2 km north of the highway that runs between Shigatse and Ngari (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Ri bo bkra bzang mountain with the monastic structures of Bar lha khang and Lha khang rtse.

It is at Ri bo bkra bzang that Rig 'dzin rGod ldem found the prophetic guides (*kha byang*) of the Northern Textual Treasures (*Byang gter*). This brief article is the product of my two-day visit and the time I spent with the current head lama of Ri bo bkra bzang monastery, Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med, who affirms that he is the 25<sup>th</sup> member of a biological lineage that began with Rig 'dzin rGod ldem himself (figs. 2, 3). No other textual sources were used to compose this modest offering. It

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<sup>\*</sup> I thank Jean-Luc Achard and Stéphane Arguillère for being so kind as to accept for publication this rather insignificant offering to the field of Byang gter studies.

<sup>1</sup> GPS coordinates of the peak of Ri bo bkra bzang: 29° 20.594' N / 86° 57.093' E.

must also be made clear to readers that I do not possess a specialization in the Byang gter tradition.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the information furnished here is more than two decades old, a kind of snapshot of its time. Since 2002, many changes in relations between the Chinese Communist government and religious communities in Tibet have been instituted. How these have affected Ri bo bkra bzang I know not.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 2. Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med, the 25<sup>th</sup> holder of the Rig 'dzin rgod ldem lineage.

<sup>2</sup> As I understand it, there are still fundamental questions pertaining to the transmission of lineages connected to the Byang gter. What is clear is that the monastery of Rdo rje brag in Dbus has been predominant in the Byang gter tradition since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which was established after the expulsion of the prominent lineage figure *byang bdag* Bkra shis stobs rgyal from his estate in the Ri bo bkra bzang region and subsequent arrival in Dbus. In the aftermath of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem's lifetime, the Byang gter ritual traditions (*gter chos*) and lineages passed through figures such as Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542), before eventually being taken up at Rdo rje brag, effectively splitting from the propagation of the tradition and lineage in Ri bo bkra bzang, the original source of legitimization (the historical details of which are still to be fully explicated). Possibly factors such as chronic political tensions between Gtang and Dbus, the Fifth Dalai Lama's subscribing to the Byang gter of Dbus, and the progressively marginal economic status of the now exclusively pastoralist Ri bo bkra bzang locale may have contributed to the sidelining of the Ri bo bkra bzang lineage in Byang gter discourse. This footnote benefited greatly from discussions with Stéphane Arguillère.

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Arguillère has brought to my attention a video on YouTube posted some five years ago that was filmed at Ri bo bkra bzang: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6m5kX3f7LmM>. It features the singer U rgyan tshe ring performing his lovely song, *Ri bo bkra bzang*. The video divulges that there has been some expansion of monastic and visitor support facilities and improvement of the access road to the site since 2002. Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med is depicted in the video.



Fig. 3. Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med and his son, the 26<sup>th</sup> holder of the Rig 'dzin rgod ldem lineage.

The father of Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med died in unfortunate circumstances when the current holder was six years of age. Despite having suffering many setbacks, Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med remains steadfast in his dedication to his religious calling, devoting his time to practice and study. According to him, Rig 'dzin rgod ldem was an emanation of Gu ru rin po che,<sup>4</sup> who prophesized that textual treasures would be discovered at Ri bo bkra bzang. The lama observes that this prediction is chronicled in works such as the *Rgod ldem pa'i tshe rnams*.

According to Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med, the origins of the lineage of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem are traced to pre-Buddhist times and a personality named Hor gur ser rgyal po, who hailed from a country to the northwest. The ruins of his palace are reputed to exist in A mdo stod ma (Amdo rdzong). Hor gur ser rgyal po was one of three ancient Hor kings, the other two being Gur dkar and Gur nag. Little is known about Gur ser's clan or history. The foremost contemporary historian of the Ri bo bkra bzang region, whom I also had the good fortune to meet, Kun dga' dun grub (born circa 1926), opines that Gur ser's lineage may be related to the Bhata hor of Tibetan imperial times. The maternal lineage of Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med is called Stag ri, an aristocratic clan of Ru thog (in far western Tibet). The head of the Stag ri emigrated to the area in the aftermath of the Tibet-Ladakh war. The Tibetan government (Sde pa gzhung) granted this royal scion an estate known as Bde skyid gling, which was renamed Ru thog. Earlier, in the time of Bkra

<sup>4</sup> It may be that this attribution of the founder to the wonderworking Buddhist sage of the 8<sup>th</sup> century takes some poetic license, but I leave this matter to specialists in the field of Byang gter studies to flesh out.

shis stobs rgyal (circa 1540/1550–1603), a major figure in the Byang gter tradition, this estate was the residence of the kings (*byang bdag*) of the Lha stod byang region.

It is believed that Gu ru rin po che accompanied by Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Sna nam rdo rje bdud 'joms spent seven days in a small cave on Ri bo bkra bzang called Padma sgrub phug. During their stay in this cave, Gu ru rin po che propitiated the deity Phur pa and hid a ritual dagger (*phur pa*) in the grotto as a treasure (*gter ma*) to be re-discovered at an appropriate time. The ritual dagger is still concealed to this day. Padma sgrub phug is also believed to have been visited by the 25 Rje 'pangs lamas, and the son of the Tibetan King Khri song lde'u btsan, Mu ne btsan po. In the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the son of the last Tibetan king Glang dar ma, Gnam lde 'od srung, stayed in Padma phug before moving further west.

As a result of the merit generated by Gu ru rin po che in Padma sgrub phug, Rig 'dzin rgod ldem was born at the future site of the lama's estate (*bla brang*), on the east foot of Ri bo bkra bzang (elevation 4450 m; fig. 4). The *bla brang* is the single largest complex at the monastery and was founded on a dome-shaped rock formation said to resemble a tortoise. The two front legs of the 'tortoise' are visible. The lama's estate is located just above a valley called Sna mo lung (fig. 5). This small valley is said to have been cultivated at one time and the foundations of small houses are found in it (the current upper extent of agriculture is a few kms to the southeast of Ri bo bkra bzang).



Fig. 4. The *bla brang* of Ri bo bkra bzang monastery.



Fig. 5. Ruined mchod rten and traces of other religious structures in the Sna mo lung Valley.

The founding of the Ri bo bkra bzang monastery is attributed to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem. His lineage is preserved in an oblations text (*gsol kha*), which along with other valuable scriptures managed to survive the destruction of the monastery during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Kun dga' don grub.

Among these manuscripts is a gnas yig entitled, *Gnas chen phyin 'debs gyi dge phyogs* (sic). This text notes that the ancient Hor deity of Ri bo bkra bzang was Hor gyi dpal bzang bshan pa, who was oath-bound by Gu ru rin po che and renamed Chos bdag bam chung brag btsan (fig. 6).

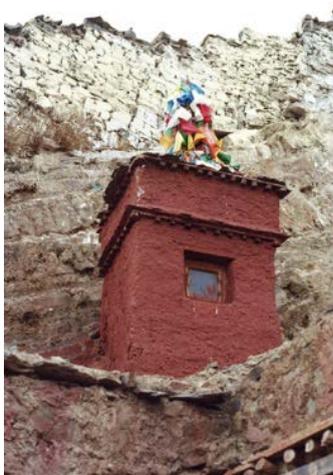


Fig. 6. The lha gtsug for the protective god Chos bdag.

Chos bdag is the clan god (*rus lha*) of Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med. He states that this is the same god as those known as Btsan rgod yab bshor dmar po and A btse rgyal po<sup>5</sup>, a well-known doctrinal protector, territorial and clan deity in Stod and the Byang thang. The domestic god (*phugs lha*) of the Stag ri lineage is fully named Dpal ldan lha mo bstan srung of Ri bo bkra bzang. The main protectors of Ri bo bkra bzang monastery are E ka dza ti and Rdo rje legs pa. The treasure protector (*gter bdag*) of the Ri bo bkra bzang mountain is Klu rgyal dri med nyi bdag dbang po, who appears to be another ancient Hor deity (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The lha gtsug of the treasure protectors, Klu rgyal dri med nyi bdag dbang po (white) and E ka dza ti (red).

This god's *bskang gsol* is present in the same Byang gter text as that of Btsan rgod yab bshor dmar po. Another group of protectors are the four outer and four inner Dge bsnyen.<sup>6</sup> The residences of the four inner Dge bsnyen are located in and around Ri bo bkra bzang and are

<sup>5</sup> The *bsang gsol* of Btsan rgod yab bshor dmar po, which is one and a half folios in length, is found in a text of the Byang gter entitled, *Btsan srung dges pa'i mchod sprin rdo rje sgra dbyangs* (sic., 21 folios in length). There is also a *bskang ba* text dedicated to A btse rgyal po used in Ri bo bkra bzang monastery.

<sup>6</sup> There is an abbreviated manuscript for this group. The four inner Dge bsnyen are: east – Rgyal mtshan btsug 'dra, south – Dug sdong skyes 'dra, west – Brag dmar rtse brgyad, and north – Rgyal mtshan spung 'dra. The four outer Dge bsnyen are: southeast – Bu le dkar po, southwest – Gnod sbyin rgyen gdang dkar po, northeast – Bdud mo snod myur nag mo, and northwest – Lha brag btsan sna spun gsum. Note that three names of the inner group are actually descriptions of their topographic nature.

marked by prayer flag masts (*dar lcog*). The residence of the western member of the group is on the summit of the Ri bo bkra bzang mountain. The other four Dge bsnyen are situated further afield. It is widely reported that Ri bo bkra bzang was once heavily covered in shrub junipers but most were cut down by the Chinese Communist government in the 1960s and 1970s for firewood.

As of 2002, there were around 20 monks and lay practitioners (*sngags pa*) affiliated with Ri bo bkra bzang, down from approximately 80 prior to the Chinese Communist period (fig. 8). Inside a chapel of the lama's residence that Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med uses for personal practice there is a dark-colored stone with a realistic human footprint (*zhabs rjes*) thought to have been made by a mature Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (fig. 9).



Fig. 8. The old monastic residences (*grwa shag*) of Ri bo bkra bzang.



Fig. 9. The self-formed footprint in stone of the mature Rig 'dzin rgod ldem enshrined in the bla brang.

Another footprint in stone bears the imprint of a young Rig 'dzin rgod ldem. Also in the chapel is a dark egg-shaped stone said to be the jewel (*nor bu*) of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem. Immediately above the lamas' residence is the Zhi khro lha khang, which was rebuilt on slightly higher ground than the pre-modern chapel. Adjacent to this chapel is a concourse for the Zhi khro 'cham held on the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> Tibetan lunar month.

Climbing higher up on the eastern slopes of the Ri bo bkra bzang mountain is a small cliff called Brag zur ba, whose horizontal strata are considered to be a self-formed (*rang byon*) stack of scriptures (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. The cliff of Brag zur ba.

A little higher up is the Mthong ba don ldan, a masonry platform that marks the spot where the sky-treading goddesses (*mkha' 'gro ma*) revealed themselves to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Mthong ba don ldan.

Higher on the slopes is Bar lha khang (4950 m; fig. 12), where the red *lha gtsug* (a kind of shrine for protective spirits) of Chos bdag, the red *lha gtsug* of E ka dza ti, and the white *lha gtsug* of Klu rgyal 'chi med are located.



Fig. 12. Bar lha khang.

Well below Bar lha khang is a sacred spring called bDud rtsis sgrub chu, whose waters are thought to be hydrologically connected to Mchod rten nyi ma, a famous pilgrimage place, located south of Sa skya. One trail from Bar lha khang accesses Pad ma phug (4860 m; fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Padma phug.

The spur with this important cave is called Sems can gla ba and, true to its name, musk deer are reported to range here.

Just below the summit of Ri bo bkra bzang is Lha khang rtse (4950 m; fig. 14). Inside this chapel is the self-formed footprint of Gu ru rin po che and his self-formed body is impressed into a cleft in the rock

formation. Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med rediscovered long-buried treasures in the form of precious ritual objects in an underground stone vault in the vicinity. Perhaps this structure marks the actual spot of the original revelation of the *kha byang*.



Fig. 14. *Lha khang rtse*.

On the very summit is the shrine for the protector Brag dmar rtse brgyad (fig. 15), from which panoramic views of the surrounding countryside extend as far east as Ngam ring skem mtsho.



Fig. 15. *Lha khang rtse and lha gtsug for Brag dmar rtse brgyad*.

Near Lha khang rtse is Mtho ris skas, a steeply inclined masonry ramp attributed to the agency of Gu ru rin po che, but which appears to belong to archaic structures that predate the dominance of Buddhism in the environs.<sup>7</sup> Mtho ris skas is 1–3 m wide, approximately 10 m tall and is wedged into a notch in the rock formation (fig. 16).

<sup>7</sup> A similar structure is found at Sha ba brag, a stronghold associated with the Bon adept Snang bzher lod po (8<sup>th</sup> century). On this site, see Bellezza 2001, pp. 90, 91.

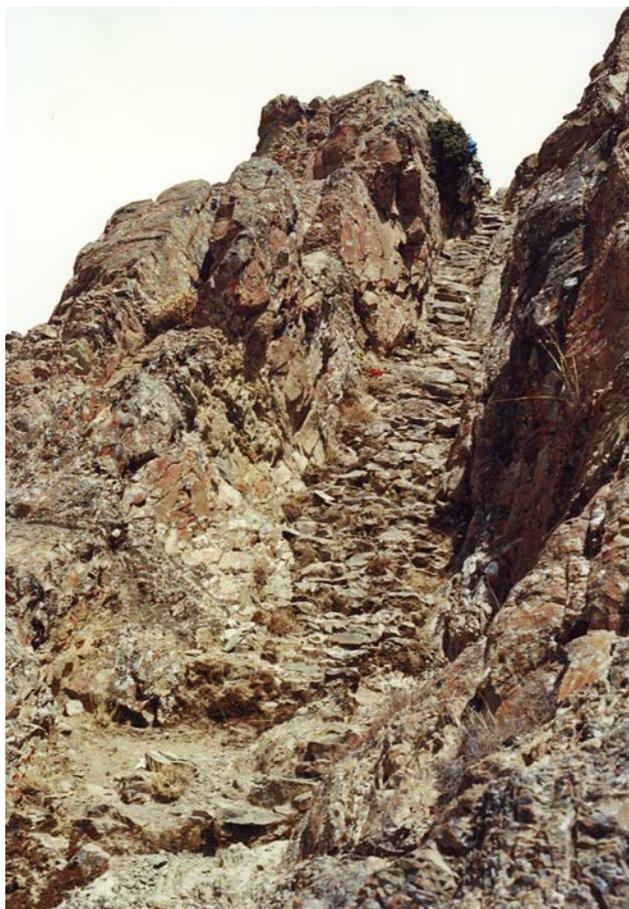


Fig. 16. *Mtho ris skas* (Steps of Heaven).

Between Lha khang rtse and Bar lha khang are various standing wall and revetment fragments, which seem to belong to defensive structures that once stood on Ri bo bkra bzang (fig. 17). That this sacred mountain is thought to have been a Hor divinity mountain (*lha ri*) seems to dovetail with the existence of these ruins. However, Rig 'dzin padma 'gyur med and Kun dga' dun grub state that there is no recorded textual or oral history of a Hor fortress established on Ri bo bkra bzang. Nonetheless, there are many archaic residential, ceremonial and funerary sites in Stod and Byang thang that devolved to the Buddhists with little or no recognition of their earlier historical or cultural significance.



Fig. 17. One of the archaic revetments on the Ri bo bkra bzang mountain. The thin slab, dry wall construction, plan, situation, and lack of a Buddhist folkloric mantle all allude to an establishment of this structure no later than the Tibetan empire period.

Indeed, on a lower summit, southwest of Ri bo bkra bzang, are the remains of what is believed to have been a Hor fortress called Brag la rdzong (4780 m).<sup>8</sup> The historical succession from pre-Buddhist cultural forms to Buddhist cultural forms at many, if not most, famous Buddhist pilgrimage and temple sites in Tibet is an area of study that has hardly been attempted to date. Yet, it is only by taking into account the full sweep of history that a more refined understanding of Tibetan religions is possible. Nothing exists in a vacuum and even the first epiphanies of the Byang gter tradition quite literally rest upon a land deeply drenched in the past. Finally, it may be stated that questions concerning how the discrepant Byang gter lineages of Ri bo bkra bzang and Rdo rje brag might be rectified or, at minimum, accounted for, are yet to be sufficiently addressed.

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<sup>8</sup> On this archaeological site, see Bellezza 2014, pp. 110–113.

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