

Here the key, Elsewhere the door¹ — Notes on the *General Introduction to the Hidden Lands*

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he *General Introduction to the Hidden Lands*³ is a widely known treasure text,⁴ traditionally attributed to Padmasambhava (8th c.) and revealed by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (1337–1408?), the founder of the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) tradition. This article serves as an introduction to Martin Boord's translation, offering a form of commentary that provides historical context and conceptual framework for this interesting Tibetan work.⁵ Although the *General*

¹ I borrowed the title from a painting by Victor Hugo, which I encountered during the writing of this article at its exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Created in 1871, this evocative work—characterised by an atmosphere of decay and timelessness, a labyrinth of arches and columns, and a central figure eroded beyond recognition—profoundly inspired my reflections on historical enigma and symbolic interpretation.

² I am deeply grateful to my employer, Virginia-Lewis Jones, Director of the Dame Vera Lynn Archive for her generous support in enabling the writing of this essay.

³ During my doctoral studies at the University of Vienna (2011-2014), I translated and analysed various versions of the *General Introduction*. I am deeply grateful to CIRDIS and the University of Vienna for making this work possible.

⁴ The text employs *gter tshegs* rather than *shad*. Its popularity is evidenced by its numerous manuscript copies preserved throughout the Himalayan region, as well as sustained interest from academic scholars, who frequently cite it: see Orofino, 1991, p. 240; Childs, 1999, p. 133; Ehrhard, 2007, p. 80; Gelle, 2020, p. 366; Baker, 2021, p. 5; Samuel, 2021, p. 64. The first English translation appears in Abdol-Hamid Sardar-Afkhami's doctoral dissertation, *The Buddha's Secret Gardens: End Times and Hidden-lands in Tibetan Imagination*, submitted to Harvard University (Sardar-Afkhami, 2001).

⁵ Martin Boord is a distinguished scholar and translator, recognized for his contributions to the study of the *Byang gter* tradition (see Boord, 1993, Boord, 2002, Boord, 2010, Boord, 2013). His translation draws upon the SIKKIM version of the *General Introduction*, a recension attested in various manuscript copies and also published in printed form under the title *Ma 'ongs lung bstan sbas yul gyi them byang*, in *mKha' spyod 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig phyogs bsdebs bzhugs*, Namgyal Institute, Gangtok, & Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala, 2008, p. 101-115, hereafter BEYUL GEN1, 2008. A manuscript of the same version, bearing the identical title, is preserved at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala BEYUL GEN2, n. d. My sincere thanks to Sonam Topgyal la, librarian of the Manuscript Collection, for drawing my attention to this manuscript and for generously sharing

Introduction belongs to the genre of prophetic revelation (*lung bstan*)—a category that permits a wide range of interpretations—it is hoped that reading the translation alongside relevant historical and religious contexts, illuminated by comparable Tibetan sources and informed by academic scholarship, will enrich our understanding of the complex phenomenon of hidden lands.

I was initially invited by Stéphane Arguillère to contribute a brief introduction to Martin Boord's translation of the *General Introduction*, intended for publication by the FCHNT in a special Byang gter issue of the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. However, it soon became apparent upon completing the first draft that a general overview alone would be insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the text's deeper significance. Composing a more detailed analysis proved to be akin to opening Pandora's box: rather than providing definitive answers, the process gave rise to a host of complex questions—not only about the concept of hidden lands, but also concerning prophetic teachings and *gter ma* literature more broadly. I found myself grappling with a number of critical questions: When was this text composed in its current form? Was it authored by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem himself, or is it an earlier or later work subsequently attributed to him? Given that the *General Introduction to Hidden Lands* appears to be a compilation of excerpts from various sources, likely originating in different historical contexts, can we determine the temporal strata of its constituent parts? Were these passages merely copied and preserved with their original meanings intact, or were they reinterpreted and strategically amended and repurposed to serve evolving ideological or doctrinal agendas? Moreover, did the composition of this prophetic text predate the events it purportedly foretells? And to what extent can prophetic teachings be treated as historical documents that reflect the socio-political and religious concerns of the periods in which they were composed, transmitted or reinterpreted?

These questions defy easy answers, leaving us with the hope that future scholarship will provide more conclusive insights. Accordingly, the primary aim of his article is to open new avenues for critical discussion and reflection.

many other interesting works on the topic during my visit to Dharamsala in 2023. In its other versions BEYUL GEN3, 2003, BEYUL GEN4, 1983, BEYUL GEN6, 1992, BEYUL GEN5, n. d., it is titled *sBas yul spyi'i them byang*. The provenance of the various versions of the *General Introduction* reveals that the text remains popular in Himalayan communities where the Northern Treasures lineage continues to be practised today.

1. *The concept of sbas yul*

The Tibetan term *sbas yul*, commonly translated as 'hidden lands,' denotes more than mere realms of human activity; they are sacred spaces deeply imbued with spiritual significance.

From the 14th century,⁶ hidden lands are seen as repositories of Padmasambhava's treasures, and are intimately associated with his travels, meditative practices, and miraculous deeds. They are locations where Padmasambhava is said to have subdued local deities, binding them by oath to safeguard his hidden treasures and the sanctity of these lands—an obligation they are believed to uphold to this day.⁷

The sacred topography of these hidden lands includes sites where Padmasambhava's twenty-five disciples have continuously appeared over the centuries in incarnation bodies engaging in Dharma practice, performing miracles, revealing treasures, and establishing temples and hermitages.⁸

The notion of *sbas yul* is intricately interwoven with the sacred geographical imaginaries of Indian Buddhism.⁹ Tibetan sources commonly depict the *sbas yul* as a mandala,¹⁰ with each of the cardinal directions marked by a gate. Depending on the season, certain gates offer more accessible entry points for the *gter ston* to open a particular hidden land. In the case of Yolmo, the landscape is described in a prophetic text¹¹ as the cosmological mandala with Mt. Meru in the centre. The prophecy instructs that a temple is to be constructed by the *gter ston* in the centre on the highest peak, and settlements for yogis, lay practitioners, and monastics are to be established in the cardinal

⁶ This date may be revised if new textual evidence is discovered.

⁷ On the subjugation of mountain gods by Padmasambhava see Canto 60 of the *Padma bka' thang* titled "Chapter on the subjugation of Tibet's vicious gods and demons and binding them under oath," *Bod kyi lha 'dre gdug pa can rnam sbyul zhing dam la btags pa'i le'u ste drug cu pa'o* O rgyan gling pa, n.d. 126b-128b. On Padmasambhava's encounters with mountain gods see Diemberger, 1994, Huber, 1999, Karmay, 1996b, Gelle, 2017.

⁸ Starting in the 1970s, several influential studies on the concept of hidden lands were published, including Aris, 1975, Reinhard, 1978, Aris, 1980, and Bernbaum, 1980. The 1990s witnessed the publication of three significant volumes that greatly advanced the study of sacred geography and mountain cults: *Mandala and landscape*, the *Reflection of the Mountain*, and the *Sacred spaces and powerful places in Tibetan culture*. Several contributions in these volumes focused specifically on Himalayan hidden lands, such as Ehrhard, 1996, Ehrhard, 1997; Diemberger, 1996; Diemberger, 1997. Subsequent important contributions include Childs, 1999, Huber, 1999, Mullard, 2011.

⁹ Boord, 2005, pp. 8-32; Huber, 1993, pp. 37-61.

¹⁰ Orofino, 1991, p. 242; Ehrhard, 1997, pp. 342-343; Huber, 1999, p. 50, p. 59.

¹¹ *Yol mo gangs kyi ra ba'i lung byang snying gi tikka*, RG6 & Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, 2003, p. 38. According to its colophon, this text was discovered by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem in Byang Zang zang lha brag.

directions. In Yolmo, this central mountain is identified as the abode of A ma g.Yang ri, the principal mountain goddess, who was subjugated by Padmasambhava and became a *gter srung*, a guardian of the Guru's hidden treasures. In other cases, such as that of Padma bkod, Vajravārahī's body-mandala is projected onto the physical landscape, with the Brahmaputra River envisioned as her central channel, extending from her head in Tibet to her womb in the jungles of northern India. As Sardar-Hamid eloquently writes: "The outer journey through the cloud forest became an inner journey of self-discovery, and the landscape itself became a reflection of the yogi's own 'body-mandala' visualized in meditation."¹²

The *sbas yul* is also portrayed as a refuge during the final years of the Age of Degeneration (*snyigs dus*), a time when the Dharma is in decline and the outer world is increasingly dominated by afflicting emotions. In this deteriorating era the only means of escaping apocalyptic conditions is to withdraw from the afflicted world and seek refuge in a hidden land. Within such sanctuaries, individuals are said to enjoy long life and good health, where bodhicitta naturally flourishes and the influence of the five poisons—ignorance, attachment, aversion, pride, jealousy—is significantly diminished.

The *sbas yul* is envisioned as a sanctuary where the Dharma can be preserved and practiced in peace—a secure haven for those seeking to undertake extended retreat. Spiritual treasures (*gter ma*) concealed by Padmasambhava and entrusted to local protector deities await discovery by the worthy practitioner. From a soteriological perspective, *sbas yul* are conceived as transitional spaces—thresholds or steppingstones to celestial realms and pure lands—where advanced stages of spiritual realisation may be cultivated and attained.¹³

The prophecies also promise that the hidden land is endowed with abundant natural resources, including fertile soil and ample food supplies. Individuals of merit from all levels of Tibetan society are deemed eligible to enter and reside within these sacred domains.

The *sbas yul* is envisioned as a site where an idealized form of Tibetan society can be maintained, insulated from the political turmoil and decline affecting Tibet. Echoing the "Golden Age" of the Imperial Period, the hidden land is ruled by a mighty *cakravartin*, a universal monarch who protects the Dharma.¹⁴ The divine origin of the king is

¹² About sTag sham pa Nus ldan rdo rje's guidebook to Padma bkod in the *gter ma* cycles *Yi dam dgongs 'dus rta mchog rol pa* and the *rTa mgrin dgong 'dus*, see Ehrhard, 1994, Sardar-Afkhami, 1996.

¹³ See a prayer from a prophetic guide attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, the *Sbas pad ma tshal gyi lam yig* RG2 & Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, 2003 pp. 21–22, cited in Gelle, 2020, p. 378.

¹⁴ About the Buddhist kingship model see Apple, 2010, pp. 114–115.

believed to guarantee the happiness, prosperity, and moral order of the realm. As a secular authority, the king serves as a symbol of political and social stability, embodying the harmonious integration of worldly governance and spiritual guardianship.

Academic research to date has examined the concept of *sbas yul* from several perspectives—including Himalayan mountain cults and the subjugation of local deities by Padmasambhava; sacred topography and mandala-like spatial concepts; Himalayan migration in relation to political, historical and social dynamics; and the Buddhist conversion of Himalayan borderlands. Apocalyptic thought, though central to Tibetan religious discourse, has only recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention.¹⁵

2. Declining Age

In the Buddhist vision of decline, the universe, human lifespan and conditions are degenerating, and the Buddhist teaching itself is in decay. Tibetan decline literature embraces the Indian cosmic vision of a myriad oscillating universes and an astronomical number of kalpas, but its real focus is the decline of the Dharma, the disappearance of Buddha Śākyamuni's teachings, that brings about an age of low morals, lawlessness and chaos. While it is widely held that the *sbas yul* concept emerged in Tibet during the 14th century,¹⁶ its doctrinal foundations can be traced to some of the earliest strata of Buddhist literature, such as the *Dīghanikāya*.¹⁷

Dudjom Rinpoche lists some important works of the decline literature translated into Tibetan, which had an impact on the Tibetan view, like the *Auspicious Aeon Sutra* (*Bhadrakalpikāsūtra*, D94), the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Mahāmeghasūtra*, D232), and the commentary of the *Abhidharmakośa* (ABK), the *Sutra of Compassion's White Lotus* (*Karuṇāpūṇḍarīkasūtra*, D112); the *Sutra of the Dialogue with the Bodhisattva Candragarbha* (*Candragarbhaparipṛcchā-sūtra*, D356); and the *Prophetic Sutra of Maitreya*¹⁸ (*Maitreyavyākaraṇasūtra*, P1011).¹⁹ The Buddhist scriptures brought to Tibet from India, Khotan, and China, which deal with the decline and disappearance of the Dharma,

¹⁵ Apple, 2010; Gelle, 2020.

¹⁶ Brauen-Dolma, 1985, p. 251; Diemberger, 2021, p. 114.

¹⁷ The 26th sutta of the *Dīghanikāya*, the *Cakkavattisīhanādasutta* ("The Lion's Roar of the Wheel-Turning One") is an illustrative precedent, which outlines cosmological and ethical themes resonant with later Tibetan formulations found in *sbas yul* texts, see *Dīghanikāya*, 2006, 3.58–79 (26), also Gelle, 2020, pp. 361–362.

¹⁸ This text was not found in the *sDe dge bKa' 'gyur*. It seems that it was apocryphal in India but was later included within the mDo sde section of some Tibetan canon editions (Peking and Narthang) and Chinese collections.

¹⁹ Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991, pp. 943–944.

followed different timetables,²⁰ but nevertheless, they were integrated into the Tibetan tradition. The duration of the Dharma was consistently conceptualized in terms of successive five-hundred-year periods, with particular emphasis placed on the suffering and degeneration associated with the final five hundred years. Across the sources, the decline of the Dharma is attributed primarily to human agency.²¹

The Age of Degeneration or the time of strife is known in Tibetan as *snyigs dus* or *rtsod pa'i dus*,²² and *dus tha ma* or *dus mtha' ma* refers to its final period. During the period of decline, the five degenerations or five corruptions (*pañca-kaṣāya*, *snyigs ma lnga*) increase. They are (1) the degeneration of lifespan (*āyuh-kaṣāya*, *tshe'i snyigs ma*), namely the shortening of lifespan from one hundred to ten years; (2) the degeneration of times (*kalpa-kaṣāya*, *dus kyi snyigs ma*), the degenerate era when people suffer from famine, diseases, natural catastrophes and wars; (3) the degeneration of afflictions (*kleśa-kaṣāya*, *nyon mongs kyi snyigs ma*), the rise of disturbing emotions like desire, jealousy, pride, anger and ignorance and the decline of morality; (4) the degeneration of views (*drṣṭi-kaṣāya*, *lta ba'i snyigs ma*), the spread of false teachings and engagement in non-virtuous actions; and (5) the degeneration of beings (*sattva-kaṣāya*, *sems can gyi snyigs ma*), the decline of the physical body, beauty, health and intellect.²³

The *General Introduction* vividly portrays the effect of the five degenerations (A.2.2.) dressed in a myth, where Māra shoots seven arrows of afflictions (*kleśa*) at Tibet. Similarly to Indian Buddhist texts,

²⁰ The *Abhidharmakośa* states that the Dharma will endure for one thousand years following the parinirvāṇa of Buddha Śākyamuni; the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarikāsūtra* extends this duration to one thousand five hundred years; the *Candragarbhaparipṛcchāsūtra* predicts two thousand years; and the *Maitreyavyākaraṇasūtra* foresees a span of five thousand years.

²¹ Nattier, 1992, pp. 119-126.

²² Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1899) in the first book of his *Treasury of Knowledge* (Jamgön Kongtrul, 2005) describes the four eras based on the Indian systems: 1. the era of completeness (*kṛtayuga*, *rdzogs ldan gyi bskal pa*); 2. the era of three-quarters (*tretāyuga*, *gsum ldan*); 3. the era of two-quarters (*dvāparayuga*, *gnyis ldan*); 4. and the era of conflict (*kaliyuga*, *rtsod ldan*) saying: “The first era is called the era of completeness because splendour and enjoyments were complete. The second is the era of three-quarters, so called because theft and sexual intercourse reduced the splendour and wealth of the environment and its inhabitants by one quarter. Then, due to lying, the splendour and enjoyments were reduced to one half, and so the third era is referred to as the era of two-quarters. The fourth and final period is the era of conflict, during which even the remnant quarter of wealth and splendour gradually diminishes due to murder and the other forms of non-virtue committed by humans.” For the Indian Buddhist uses of the term *kaliyuga*, see Eltschinger, 2020.

²³ Vasubandhu & La Vallée Poussin, 1991 (ABK), p. 482.

it refers to famine, war, and epidemics as the three key indicators heralding the advent of the final era.

3. Historical context

Following the Mongol invasion in 1240, Tibet was gradually incorporated into the Yuan Empire over subsequent decades, with its territory divided among various princely rulers exercising control over distinct territories. As the Mongols distributed appanages among Tibetan lamas and institutions, various princes came to support different Tibetan religious schools and monasteries; in this context, Möngke²⁴ emerged as a patron of the 'Bri gung pa tradition, and he was elected as Great Khan in 1251.²⁵ When Kublai Khan (1215–1294) succeeded his older brother Möngke (1209–1259) as *khagan* in 1260, the lamas of Sa skya assumed the role of his preceptors, and Sa skya became the principal political centre of Tibet. In 1271 Kublai established the Yuan dynasty and claimed succession from prior Chinese dynasties. Despite his teacher 'Phags pa's (1235–1280) protest, Kublai did not want to tolerate any school other than the Sa skya pa,²⁶ that provoked apprehension among adherents of other traditions.

When the 'Bri gung pa monks destroyed the monastery of Bya yul and killed its abbot in 1285, their rebellion turned soon into a civil war, and the new *dpon chen* of Sa skya, Ag len rDo rje dpal with the help of Mongol troops torched the 'Bri gung monastery²⁷ and massacred all the monks. The united Sa skya and Mongol forces then marched

²⁴ Möngke also participated in the Mongol campaigns in Europe. The Mongols defeated the Kingdom of Hungary at the Battle of Muhi—April 11, 1241—leading to the destruction of the kingdom and the deaths of an estimated half of its population. They launched devastating attacks on Poland, Moravia, Bohemia and other Central European territories. Although smaller Mongol detachments continued operations into Dalmatia and Moravia in 1242, the death of Ögedei Khan in December 1241 necessitated the return of the princes to Mongolia to participate in the *qurultai* to elect a new Great Khan.

According to Petech, when Sa skya Paṇḍita traveled to Lianzhou with his two nephews—one of whom was 'Phags pa—to meet Göden Khan and discuss the political situation in Tibet, he was compelled to wait for a couple of months, because Göden had departed for Central Mongolia to attend the *qurultai*, and the meeting between the two ultimately took place only in the 1st month of 1247. Petech, 1990, pp. 9-11.

²⁵ Petech, 1990, pp. 9-11.

²⁶ Similar narratives are found concerning the 5th Dalai Lama, Gushri Khan, and other Mongol leaders of the period (17th c.).

²⁷ The 'Bri gung pas were supported by troops from sTod hor, which indicated the Chagatai Khanate this time.

through Dwags po, Kong po, IHo brag and Mon, thus imposing Sa skya and Mongol authority over the southeastern part of Tibet.²⁸

In the year of 1327, the titles and seals of Sa skya were divided among the four branches of the family. The splitting up of the Sa skya 'Khon family opened the way for many violent internal disputes, and when in 1349 Byang chub rgyal mtshan of Phag mo gru permanently usurped the position of Sa skya, the latter's Mongol allies passively acknowledged him as the new ruler of Tibet.²⁹ Anxiety over marginalisation, coupled with the relocation of political centres prompted migration, resulting in the abandonment of agricultural lands. The consequent collapse of irrigation infrastructure contributed to a severe drought and famine in Tibet.³⁰

During these periods of internal chaos, Tibet simultaneously suffered from external attacks from several directions. Invaders identified in the sources as *sTod hor* (upper or western *hor*),³¹ raided Tibet around 1320. In 1349, Muslim forces led by Sultan Shams ud-dīn Ilyās of Bengal attacked the Kathmandu Valley from the south. The inscriptions and documents cited by Petech attest to the extensive devastation inflicted upon the Kathmandu Valley, including its stupas and temples, by this army.³²

Epidemics such as the plague³³—a devastating pandemic caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*—may have contributed to the sense of anxiety reflected in *sbas yul* literature. While it is well established that the bubonic plague ravaged Europe between 1346 and 1353, becoming the deadliest pandemics in human history and resulting in the deaths approximately half the European population, an estimated 50 million people, its broader effects across Asia, including possible repercussions in Tibet, merit further consideration. The earliest reliably traceable evidence points to the emergence of the European strain in what is now Kyrgyzstan, where there was a sudden surge of

²⁸ Petech, 1990, pp. 30-31.

²⁹ Jackson, 1976, p. 47; Petech, 1990, pp. 119-137.

³⁰ Diemberger, 2021, p. 112. citing Sinha et al. 2010, pp. 1-16.

³¹ *sTod hor* refers to the Chagatai Khanate, which, until the reign of Kublai Khan, acknowledged the supremacy of the Great Khan. However, it became increasingly Turkicised and broke away. The Chagatai forces launched multiple incursions into the territories of the Delhi Sultanate and the Yuan dynasty, including regions of Tibet, both during and after the period of the Yuan rule. In 1680, the remaining Chagatai territories were absorbed by the Dzungar Khanate. More details in Petech, 1990.

³² Petech says: "The invasion by Shams ud-dīn Ilyās may have contributed, along with the perishability of the building material (timber), to the disparition of all the monuments of ancient Nepalese architecture; none of the extant buildings in the Valley proper, however ancient their foundation, seems to be earlier than the 15th century." Petech, 1984, pp. 125-126.

³³ It was not called the Black Death until the 1750s.

deaths in 1338-1339.³⁴ However, Hymes presents several Chinese sources, which mention epidemics in the 13th century in relation to the arrival of the Mongol army,³⁵ and reports about epidemic outbreaks in the middle of the 14th century in big Chinese cities. There is also a growing body of scholarly literature on epidemics in Tibet and their treatment in Tibetan medical literature.³⁶ In a particularly notable text, *The Vase of the Amṛta of Immortality* ('*Chi med bdud rtsi bum pa*), composed in the form of a treasure text (*gter ma*), Padmasambhava prophesies a future pandemic that will claim the lives of three out of every four people worldwide before eventually reaching Tibet. In addition to its prophetic content, the text forms part of a medical cycle devoted to the treatment of infectious diseases (*gnyan nad*) and epidemic fevers (*rim tshad*). The rediscovery of the *Vase of Amṛta* is attributed to rDor 'bum Chos kyi grags pa. According to the tradition, the yellow scroll associated with this cycle is said to have "emerged [to him] directly from the heart of Hayagrīva at the temple of Byang Pra dun rtse."³⁷ Jamgön Kongtrul further reports that rDor 'bum Chos kyi grags pa "brought supplements to the same cycle out from beneath a stone image of Maitreya and revealed the *Cycle of the Small Vase of Amṛta* from the heart of an image of the Pañjara Mahākāla."³⁸ rDor 'bum Chos kyi grags pa's dates are not known, but academic scholarship generally assumes that the text was composed in the second half of the 13th century.³⁹

The 5th Dalai Lama identified the *Vase of Amṛta* as a *byang gter* cycle and connects it to important figures like bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603) and the physicians of the famous Brang ti and Zur families.⁴⁰ According to McGrath, the *Vase of Amṛta*, based on the symptoms described and the scale of the epidemic mentioned, is best interpreted as an account of the bubonic plague in thirteenth-century Tibet.⁴¹ McGrath's translation of the root text shows that the *Vase of Amṛta* closely parallels our treasure text, the *General Introduction*, not only in terms of its narrative framework—the *Vase of Amṛta* also takes the form

³⁴ A brief report on the findings by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig was published by *The Guardian*, June 15, 2022. For a comprehensive and thought-provoking overview of the history of the plague in East Asia, see Hymes, 2015.

³⁵ Hymes, 2015, pp. 289-293.

³⁶ See McGrath, 2019 and <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-116/>.

³⁷ Simioli, 2019, p. 222. Pra dun rtse is one of the four *mtha' 'dul* temples. The translation of an interesting guidebook of Byang Pra dun rtse can be found in Ramble, 2015.

³⁸ See under No. 55. Dorbum Chökyi Drakpa in Jamgön Kongtrul, 2011.

³⁹ Simioli, 2019, p. 223, McGrath, 2021, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Simioli, 2019, p. 223.

⁴¹ McGrath, 2021, p. 217.

of a dialogue, here between Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal—but also in its portrayal of the Age of Decline, highlighting moral degeneration and human agency as the underlying causes of the epidemic.⁴²

By the time the Mongol rule collapsed in the middle of the 14th century, the memory of the Imperial Era (7-9th cent.) had become a massive narrative of the Golden Age among the adherents of the rNying ma pa, in which King Khri srong lde btsan appeared as the *cakravartin* and Padmasambhava as the Second Buddha. The power of the king supported by the Buddhist order was symbolized by the system of royal temples built in concentric circles from Lhasa to the borderlands to contain negative energies and maintain order.⁴³ The protection and restoration of these sacred sites were viewed as a means of counteracting the negative effects of the declining age. Another potent means of dispelling the darkness and averting both external and internal dangers was the revelation of spiritual teachings (*gter ma*) concealed by Padmasambhava and their subsequent integration into religious practice.⁴⁴

4. Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's hidden lands

Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (1337–1408?) was one of the prominent treasure revealers (*gter ston*) credited with the discovery of a substantial corpus of *gter ma* literature, including the text under examination. He was considered to be the reincarnation of sNa nam rDo rje bdud 'joms (8th c.),⁴⁵ an 8th century minister of King Khri srong lde btsan, who was dispatched to India to invite Padmasambhava to Tibet. He was recognized as a mind emanation of Padmasambhava and revered as the founder of the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) tradition.⁴⁶

Rig 'dzin rGod ldem first received treasure texts revealed by Ri khrod pa bZang po grags pa,⁴⁷ a yogi of the Dwags po bka' brgyud

⁴² These are both general features in *sbas yul* and other type of *gter ma* literature. Compare Chapter 2 in McGrath, 2021, p. 222, with the *General Introduction* A.2.2.

⁴³ Sørensen & Hazod, 2005, pp. 171-215.

⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of treasure literature and revelation see Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991; Gyatso, 1993; Doctor, 2005; Mayer, 2015.

⁴⁵ He was born into the sNa nam clan in gTsang rong. He became one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava. He attained *siddhis* by practicing the *sādhana* of Vajrakīlaya. Angowski, 2022.

⁴⁶ See Boord, 1993; Herweg, 1994; Turpeinen, 2015; Valentine, 2015.

⁴⁷ He meditated on Mt. Shri (rTsib ri) in southern Tibet, where he had a dream about treasure texts hidden in the temple of Gram pa rgyang. However, he did not act on the dream at the time. Later, while in gLang 'khor, he encountered a man, thought to be a manifestation of Padmasambhava, who again urged him to reveal the hidden treasures. He then revealed caskets of treasure scrolls at the Gram pa

tradition,⁴⁸ who revealed them in 1362. Ri khrod pa bZang po grags pa entrusted the treasures to three of his “brothers” for safekeeping until they meet the person with the right karma—someone who would speak of the Gungthang king. This set of texts contained the famous *Gsol 'debs le'u bdun ma*,⁴⁹ an important prayer attributed to Padmasambhava and said to be concealed by Mu khri btsan po,⁵⁰ destined to protect and reinvigorate the royal line during the time of degeneration. According to the story, since Rig 'dzin rGod ldem met these three individuals on the road and told them that King bKra shis lde (r. 1352–1365) had just passed away, the three brothers handed over Ri khrod pa bZang po grags pa's treasures to him.⁵¹

King bKra shis lde's successor on the throne was Phun tshogs lde (1338–1370), who stayed in Sa skya and was not keen to support Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's activities. However, rGod ldem was able to instill faith in him by performing a wrathful Vajrakīlaya (Tib. rDo rje phur pa) rite, but even then, the prince offered only one *zho*⁵² of gold as a treasure substitute (*gter tshab*).⁵³

Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's main treasure revelation happened in 1366 on two different occasions. The lineage he founded was named “Northern Treasures” after these discoveries.⁵⁴ While the treasure-master stayed in Mt. bKra bzang and his fame continued to grow, the political crisis was escalating. King Phun tshogs lde was killed by his father-in-law, the lord of the myriarchy of Byang, when his armies marched into Gung thang and occupied the kingdom. The young king was killed for having his first-born child with a maidservant from Sa skya. This brought the number of murdered Gung thang princes to three as prophesized in the *General Introduction*.⁵⁵ Phun tshogs lde's

rgyang temple and discovered additional treasures in the Yon bu Valley. Herweg, 1994, pp. 85-88.

⁴⁸ Dwags po bka' brgyud comprises the branches of the bKa' brgyud tradition that trace their lineage back to sGam po pa (1079–1153). In terms of sacred geography, adherents of this tradition—particularly the 'Bri gung pa and the 'Brug pa lineages—were among the earliest to establish hermitages and temples, and to assert control over pilgrimage routes at major sacred mountains such as Ti se (Mount Kailash), La phyi, and Tsa ri.

⁴⁹ See <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/topics/leu-dunma/>.

⁵⁰ Mu khri btsan po, one of the sons of King Khri srong lde btsan.

⁵¹ Herweg, 1994, p. 90.

⁵² One *zho* is approximately one tenth of an ounce of gold.

⁵³ Herweg, 1994, pp. 92-93.

⁵⁴ In order to distinguish them from the Southern Treasures (*lho gter*) that had been revealed in previous centuries by Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1136–1204) and Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270).

⁵⁵ Sardar-Afkhami, 2001, p. 76, citing KAH THOG RIG 'DZIN, 2006, BDRC: MW1GS45274_EC0614.

sons⁵⁶ were too young to ascend the throne. For a five-year period, the rule passed into the hand of a regent, who seems to have been the district military commander. As a result of the expansion of the Western Mallas, Gung thang's influence over certain western territories, such as sPu rang and gLo, gradually diminished.⁵⁷

In 1373, rGod ldem went to search for the hidden land of 'Bras mo gshongs and stayed there for fourteen years. Soon after his return, in 1389, he became the personal preceptor to the king of Gung thang, Khri rgyal mChog grub lde (r. 1370–1396), and according to a royal edict quoted in his biography,⁵⁸ the king offered him Ri bo dpal 'bar as a monastic estate, and one hidden land.⁵⁹ He opened the hidden land of sKyid mo lung on the southern border of Mang yul Gung thang, and offered it to the king.⁶⁰

In the hagiography of rGod ldem written by his late disciple Nyi ma bZang po, only two hidden lands are named, 'Bras mo gshongs, where rGod ldem spent fourteen years and which he discusses extensively in his *Dream Diary*,⁶¹ and sKyid mo lung, which he revealed and offered to King mChog grub lde, the King of Gung thang. Many of the texts quoted by Nyi ma bZang po remain unidentified, some may not have survived the storms of time, others may be waiting in silence to be found.

The *General Introduction* presents several lists of hidden lands; however, none of these corresponds to the specific list of seven hidden lands attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem.⁶² The text's enduring prominence may be attributed, in large part, to a prophetic passage in its colophon that legitimizes Rig 'dzin rGod ldem as the *gter ston* destined to reveal seven hidden lands intended as sanctuaries for Tibetans in the final era. This passage recounts Padmasambhava's prediction that, in a future Dragon or Ox year, a man of good karma will discover this treasure text safeguarded by the twelve brTan ma⁶³

⁵⁶ mChog grub lde and bSod nams lde.

⁵⁷ Gung thang maintained close ties with Sa skya through strategic marriage alliances and frequently received military support from them in response to incursions by the Western Mallas and other attacking forces.

⁵⁸ Herweg, 1994, p. 228.

⁵⁹ NYIMA 1, 1983 mentions three, while NYIMA 2, 1985 refers to only one, without naming it.

⁶⁰ For further details about his life and activities see Boord, 2013, pp. 38-45.

⁶¹ DREAM, 1983.

⁶² With the exception of Padma tshal, the name of the remaining six hidden lands from Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's list appear in other enumerations of hidden lands in the *General Introduction*, though they are often associated with different geographical locations or interpretations.

⁶³ In Buddhist texts, they are more commonly referred to as bsTan ma bcu gnyis; ancient Tibetan mountain goddesses who were subjugated by Padmasambhava. See more in Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996, pp. 181-198.

goddesses and extract it from the eastern side of a mountain, thereby initiating the revelation of seven hidden lands in the south.⁶⁴

rGod Idem's seven hidden lands gained widespread popularity through the influential work of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), whose list draws upon *The Guru's Seven Lockets* (*Gu ru'i ga'u bdun ma*), also known as *Entry key of the Seven Hidden Lands* (*sBas yul bdun gyi them byang*),⁶⁵ a text attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod Idem.⁶⁶ This widely circulated text is frequently included in broader compilations of Northern Treasures prophecies, such as the *Lamp Illuminating Future Prophecies* (*Ma 'ongs lung bstan gsal ba'i sgron me*).⁶⁷

The list of seven hidden lands presented in *The Guru's Seven Lockets*, a source often cited by later Tibetan authors,⁶⁸ is as follows:

1. The Happy Valley Endowed with Bliss (bDe ldan sKyid mo lung)⁶⁹
2. The Hidden Lotus Grove (sBas pa Pad ma'i tshal)⁷⁰
3. The Playground of Dākinīs (Rol pa mKha' 'gro gling)⁷¹
4. The Valley of Artemisia in rGyal (Rgyal kyī Khan pa lung)⁷²
5. The Divine Palace Basin (lHa yi Pho brang sdings)⁷³
6. The Hidden Land called Rice Valley (sBas yul 'Bras mo shong)⁷⁴
7. The Wheat Basin (Gro mo khud).⁷⁵

⁶⁴ Earlier in the text, in A3.3. Padmasambhava prophesies that the individual who opens 'Bras mo gshongs will "gradually reveal the succession of seven hidden lands," and follows this with a disordered enumeration of additional locations that do not correspond to the later standardized list of the seven *sbas yul*.

⁶⁵ Also as *sBas yul bdun gyi them byang ga'u bdun ma*.

⁶⁶ GAU DUN1, 1983; GAU DUN3, 1995; GAU DUN2, 2015.

⁶⁷ LADAKH 1, 1973, ff. 545.4-548.1 and LADAKH 2, 1973, BDRC: W1KG22374.

⁶⁸ For instance, Guru bkra shis, in his well-known historical work *Gu bkra chos 'byung* written in 1813, cites the names of the seven hidden lands from *The Guru's Seven Lockets*. He also refers to a text called *sBas yul them yig*, which appears to differ from the *General Introduction* based on the partial list he provides. TASHI, 1990, p. 508.

⁶⁹ Tsum valley, south of Mang yul on the Tibetan-Nepalese border.

⁷⁰ Identified with the Helambu area of Nepal.

⁷¹ Rol pa mKha' 'gro gling lies west of Khumbu in present-day Nepal. All seven sites mentioned are described in Tibetan sources as the "southern valleys," indicating that, when these sources were composed, the sites were considered part of Tibet.

⁷² In the *Ga'u bdun ma*, it is identified with rGyal gyi (m)Khan pa lung in Bud. The name is sometimes rendered by scholars as "the Victorious Valley of Artemisia"; however, in other sources *rGyal* seems to refer to a specific geographical region.

⁷³ This hidden land has not yet been identified. The term *sdings* can mean "cavity", "depression", "basin", but also "plateau", "levelled ground."

⁷⁴ Identified with Sikkim, now in India.

⁷⁵ Identified with the Chumbi valley, east of Sikkim, see Schwieger, 1985, p. xxxvii, fn. 55. The description of the seven *sbas yul* can be found in GAU DUN1, 1983 ff. 6a-7b.

The Guru's Seven Lockets is included in the *Collection of the Teachings of the Northern Treasures*,⁷⁶ a sixty-three-volume compendium that serves as the foundational source for the FCHNT project.⁷⁷ Its inclusion underscores the continued significance of both the text itself and the list of seven *sbas yul* attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem. Although the *General Introduction* is not included in this 2015 compilation, it nevertheless serves as the opening text in several historical and contemporary Byang gter collections related to hidden lands.⁷⁸

5. *The General Introduction*

In the literature concerning hidden lands, one encounters a wide array of text types, often with overlapping content.⁷⁹ The *General Introduction* by genre or text type is a *them byang*, with *them* meaning “threshold, entry” and *byang* meaning “manual.” The term *byang bu*—the second element in this compound—designates a manual in *gter ma* literature that contains prophecies indicating where and how to discover the remainder of the treasure cycle. Its function is twofold: it both authenticates the discoverer personally and verifies the contents of the treasure to be revealed.⁸⁰ As such, it serves as a preliminary guide that initiates the journey of exploration, while also functioning as a prophecy to be fulfilled. In this sense, it constitutes a secret entry certificate or passkey for the future discoverer. For the general reader it provides information on the relevant prophecies, locations, routes, rituals, as well as the dangers and benefits associated with the search and discovery of a hidden land.⁸¹

The frame story of the *General Introduction* is set at bSam yas, where King Khri srong lde btsan⁸² requests Padmasambhava to deliver teachings on the final times—an era in which the Buddha's teachings will decline and ultimately vanish. The king specifically inquires about what measures Tibetans should adopt to uphold the Dharma and survive the Age of Degeneration. In response to the king's five

⁷⁶ JANGTER COLL, 2015, BDRC: MW2PD17457, ff. 589-614.

⁷⁷ Arguillère, 2022, pp. 5-21.

⁷⁸ See BEYUL GEN1, 2008; BEYUL GEN2, n. d.; BEYUL GEN3, 2003; BEYUL GEN4, 1983.

⁷⁹ *gNas yig* (guide to the sacred places), *gnas bshad* (description of sacred places), *lam yig* (travel guides), *dkar chag* (inventory), *lam byang* (route lists), *kha byang* (preliminary treasure guides), *byang bu* (prophetic inventory), *gnas kyi ngos 'dzin* (identification of a sacred place), *gnas sgo 'byed pa* (opening of the gate to the sacred place), *them byang* (introduction), *sbas 'debs* (hidden boundary region).

⁸⁰ Gyatso, 1993, p. 128.

⁸¹ Tulku Thondup offers a general summary about the use of prophetic guides, see Tulku Thondup, 1994, pp. 72-76.

⁸² Var. Khri srong lde'u btsan.

questions, Padmasambhava outlines the geographic locations of various hidden lands (*sbas yul*), provides directions to precious metals and precious stones intended to sustain the traveler on their journey, identifies omens and signs that indicate the appropriate time to depart and offers prophecies concerning future Tibetan reincarnations who will uncover these lands. Above all, he urges Tibetans to seek refuge in hidden lands.⁸³

*An annotated outline of the General Introduction*⁸⁴

Q1. What outer and inner signs will indicate the onset of the last five-hundred-year period during which Tibetans must seek refuge in hidden lands?

A1. Outer signs: Worship will cease in the main royal temples as well as in the border-taming (*mtha' 'dul*)⁸⁵ temples, and these sacred sites will fall into decay. After five generations in 'On chang rdo,⁸⁶ an emanated ruler is prophesied to construct a temple. This prophecy appears to allude to the reign of Ral pa can (802–838),⁸⁷ who is credited with the founding the sKyid smad 'On chang rdo dPe med bkra shis dge 'phel gyi gtsug lag khang in the lower sKyid chu Valley.⁸⁸

Inner signs: The king's authority will decline, leading to a period of anarchy lasting for 123 years—a clear reference to the Era of Fragmentation (9-10th c.). Subsequently, Tibet will be conquered by the Mongols of Mu dur nag po, a figure identified with Möngke Khan. Mongol rule will endure for 125 years, corresponding the Yuan period (1240–1364).⁸⁹ According to the prophecy, the end of

⁸³ Scholars often acknowledged an uncertainty about the origin and authorship of these *sbas yul* texts attributed to Rig 'dzin rгод ldem and noticed borrowings from other works. See Aris, 1980, p. 82; Orofino, 1991, p. 245-247.

⁸⁴ The translation by Martin Boord and the Tibetan transliteration of the *General Introduction* follow this article, with the same numbering of paragraphs found in the present outline.

⁸⁵ According to the Tibetan tradition, the thirteen geomantic temples tame the supine demoness (*srin mo*) that lie on the land of Tibet. The Jo khang is in the heart centre. The four Region Subduing temples (*ru gnon*) pin down the arms and hips; the Border Taming temples (*mtha' 'dul*) the elbows and knees, the Farther Taming temples (*yang 'dul*) the palms and feet. See more in Sørensen & Hazod, 2005.

⁸⁶ It is also spelled as 'U shang rdo.

⁸⁷ The 40th king of the Yar klungs dynasty.

⁸⁸ See Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991, p. 522.

⁸⁹ According to Shakabpa, Tibet gained its independence from the Mongols in the time of Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302–1364), and China gained hers in 1368 under the leadership of Chu Yuan-chang. Shakabpa, 1967, p. 73.

Mongol rule marks the time to seek refuge in hidden lands, but people are not ready to go.

Q2. Will Tibetans, in the future, be able to locate and successfully establish themselves in these hidden lands (*sbas yul*)?

A2.1. Rather than providing a direct response to the question, the prophecy unfolds through a somber vision of the future, foretelling the complete subjugation of Tibet by a flesh-hunting *rākṣasa* and the widespread death of its population. This ominous imagery may allude to an epidemic, such as the bubonic plague, though the reference remains ambiguous. The prophecy then reiterates that during the 125 years of the Mongol domination, Tibetan leaders will live like subordinates, and for the subsequent 60 years, they will become “butchers,” and kill each other. The prophecy concludes once more with a call to depart.

In the following passage, the prophecy exhorts those intending to leave Tibet to ensure they are guided by a virtuous leader—a righteous king who upholds the Dharma. It then outlines the necessary preparations for the journey, emphasising the importance of unwavering perseverance in the face of anticipated hardships. The text notes that, beginning with the Mongol incursion—specifically Dorta the Black’s (Go rta nag po)⁹⁰ campaign against Tibet in 1240—hidden treasures begin to be gradually revealed. It is through the power of these treasures that the aspiration to seek out the hidden lands (*sbas yul*) will arise.

The prophecy then reiterates that the Mongol rule will eventually come to an end, followed by a period of internal conflict. During a brief interlude of relative peace, a few individuals will attempt to seek out the hidden lands; however, their efforts will be met with jealousy and ridicule from others, leading some to lose faith.

A.2.2. The prophecy continues with a narrative concerning Māra, who is said to shoot seven arrows at Tibet. Although this passage appears to be an interpolation—its original source remains unidentified—it recounts how Māra, assuming the form of dGa’ rab dbang phyug, the Lord of Supreme Desire⁹¹—stands atop Mount Meru. From this vantage point, he surveys the realms and rejoices at the triumph of darkness and the decline of the Buddha

⁹⁰ The army of the Mongol military commander Dorta the Black invaded Tibet in the Iron Male Mouse year. See Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991, p. 766, Shakabpa, 1967, p. 61.

⁹¹ T. *lha’i bu’i bdud* (lit. “The māra of the sons of the gods”), Skt. *kāmadeva*. He obstructs the attainment of virtue through the forces of jealousy and desire.

Śākyamuni's teachings in Jambudvīpa. It is foretold that during this time, Bodhgāyā will be invaded by the Turks,⁹² and, even in Tibet, only remnants of the Dharma will persist.

The seven arrows shot at Tibet give rise to widespread moral and social degeneration. Rulers and leaders turn against one another in conflict and bloodshed; scholars lose their compassion and abandon study and Dharma practice; ministers and counsellors become manipulative and deceitful. Young men become consumed by craving for food and drinks, engaging in hunting, consuming red meat, and drinking blood. Women are portrayed as deceitful, and fratricide becomes common. Those with limited intelligence resort to foul language, theft, and cheating, while virtuous individuals suffer sudden and untimely deaths. In response to this, the prophecy urges people to seek refuge in hidden lands—both as an escape from a dysfunctional, conflict-ridden society and as a means of protection from the potential violence of foreign invaders.

Comparable accounts of moral decline are already attested in the Pāli Canon⁹³ and were later adapted within Mahāyāna literature, including, for instance, the *Abhidharmakośa* and other works translated into Tibetan during the first dissemination (*snga dar*) of the Dharma.⁹⁴ Similar narratives of degeneration emerge in Tibetan *gter ma* literature such as the *Ma ni bka' 'bum*,⁹⁵ the *Padma bka'i thang*,⁹⁶ the *Vase of Amṛta*,⁹⁷ and the writings associated with Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's tradition,⁹⁸ as well as in the *Legend of the Great Stupa*.⁹⁹ Notably, in the case of the *Ma ni bka' 'bum*, depictions of moral decay and decline of the Dharma are framed as a rhetorical strategy to inspire the cultivation of devotion to Avalokiteśvara. In other *gter ma* texts, however, comparable themes are invoked to encourage the protection and preservation of the Buddhist teachings and their institutional foundations.

⁹² This event, when *Du ru kha rgyal po* attacked *Rdo rje gdan* and damaged the golden statue of the Buddha is part of the mythic history of the black flying leather mask (*bse 'bag*) of the *Sa skya pa*. See Sørensen & Hazod, 2005, p. 284 and Vitali, 2001, pp. 26-27, fn. 16; pp. 28-29, fn. 20.

⁹³ See Buddha, 1911, 2006, pp. 58-79.

⁹⁴ A preliminary overview of the Indian precedents of Tibetan apocalyptic literature, see Gelle, 2020.

⁹⁵ Kapstein, 1993, p. 87.

⁹⁶ Douglas, 1978, pp. 597-604.

⁹⁷ McGrath, 2021, p. 222.

⁹⁸ See Achard, 2023 for the translation of a similar narrative of a section of the *sGron ma rnam gsum* quoted by Se ston Padma dbang chen in *Byang gter spyi bcings: Byang gter chos skor rnam kyī spyi chings rin chen 'phreng ba*, TBRC W23375, p. 36. <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/1844>.

⁹⁹ Dowman, 2004, pp. 41-45.

A2.3. The prophecy then alludes—without explicitly naming them—to the existence of three hidden lands in mDo Khams,¹⁰⁰ three in dBus,¹⁰¹ eight in gTsang,¹⁰² and two in mNga' ris.¹⁰³ This is followed by a cryptic series of prophetic statements:

- a hidden land in dBus will be revealed by an emanation of Vairocana;¹⁰⁴
- a hidden land in gTsang will be opened by a single emanation embodying the three men of Khams;¹⁰⁵
- a hidden land in Western Tibet will be revealed by an incarnation of Ācārya Jñāna;¹⁰⁶
- and the hidden land of mNga' ris will remain unopened.

Thirty years after the end of Mongol rule, Tibet will be invaded by nine armies from the east and twenty-one from the west. These forces will launch five successive assaults, and the foreign incursions will continue for sixty years. The situation will become even more dire than during the cannibal demon's¹⁰⁷ attack. These incursions will bring devastation across the entirety of Tibet, from west to east. Only a solitary seed of Dharma will remain, preserved at bSam yas¹⁰⁸ and the lHa sa gtsug lag khang.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰ Eastern Tibet.

¹⁰¹ Eastern part of Central Tibet.

¹⁰² Western part of Central Tibet.

¹⁰³ Western Tibet. There is a different distribution of hidden lands mentioned in the *Ma'ongs lung bstan gsal ba'i sgron me* (LADAKH 2, 1973, pp. 455-456.): from Ti se until rKong po on the borderlands of Mon, there are eleven hidden lands: two in mNga' ris, seven in gTsang, and four in dBus.

¹⁰⁴ Vairocana, a prominent Tibetan scholar and translator, was born in sPa gor during the 8th century. Under the patronage of Khri srong lde btsan, he was dispatched to India to study with Indian masters, where he trained extensively under the guidance of the renowned teacher Śrī Siṃha (Shri Sing ha). Vairocana became one of the foremost masters of rDzogs chen. Despite his achievements, he was unjustly exiled to Eastern Tibet for a period. Eventually, however, King Khri srong lde btsan recalled him to Lhasa. See his biography Ani Jinba Palmo & g.Yu sgra snying po, 2004.

¹⁰⁵ 'The Three Men from Khams' can refer to g.Yo dge 'byung, dMar Shākyamuni, and gTsang Rab gsal, who fled their meditation hermitage at Chu bo ri carrying scriptures of the Vinaya and Abhidharma. They were escaping the persecution of Buddhists in Central Tibet during the 9th century under the rule of gLang dar ma.

¹⁰⁶ gNyags Jñānakumāra: https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Nyak-jñānakumāra/TBRC_P6525.

¹⁰⁷ It might refer to an epidemic like the plague.

¹⁰⁸ The first monastery of Tibet built during the reign of King Khri srong lde btsan in 767 AD.

¹⁰⁹ The Jo khang temple of Lhasa, also known historically as the Ra sa 'phrul snang, built originally in ca. 640 during the reign of King Srong btsan sgam po.

A2.4. The next section of the prophecy emphasizes the importance of Dharma practice during the final era and underscores the necessity to leave for hidden lands. It warns that those who fail to heed the prophetic instructions will ultimately face terrible fate. In contrast, those of discerning mind will either seek out hidden lands (*sbas yul*) or engage in solitary, single-pointed meditation in an isolated place. As a result, in their next life, they will attain liberation in the buddha-fields.

Q3. How can Tibet and its people be protected from the poisonous arrows of Māra?

A3.1. In response, the following protective sites and ritual actions are enumerated:

- Three outer places (*phyi'i yul gsum*): three temples constructed by the three Dharma kings; a mantra of Uṣṇīṣa¹¹⁰ should be inserted in the parasol or the dome of these places for protection.
- Three inner substances (*nang gi rdzas gsum*): medicine of accomplishment; relics of the Buddha; and consecrated substance from a *maṇḍala*.
- Three secret *samādhi* (*ting nge 'dzin gsum*): inseparable practice of the personal deity (*iṣṭadevatā*), bodhicitta, and deep *samādhi*.
- Three fierce mantra: mantra of Vajranakhinī (rDo rje sDer mo),¹¹¹ of the wrathful Uṣṇīṣacakravartin (gTsug gtor 'Khor los bsgyur ba),¹¹² and of Vajra Armour (rDo rje go khab).¹¹³
- Three rounds of preparation: vajra posture; dancing a fierce dance; and prostration and circumambulation.
- Practitioners are instructed to consult the text called *A Canopy of Meteoric Thunderbolts* (*gNam lcags thog gi gur*)¹¹⁴ for their own protection.

A3.2. About keys and certificates for accessing hidden lands Padmasambhava says:

- For the 33 great [hidden] lands (*gnas chen*), seven documents are required for each.
- For the 13 medium size lands (*gnas bar pa*), three documents are

¹¹⁰ The Uṣṇīṣa mantra, or Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya dhāraṇī is a powerful mantra for longevity and overcoming obstacles, and it is reputed to help during violent times.

¹¹¹ Her name translates as Vajra Claw into English. She is a wrathful activity *ḍākinī*.

¹¹² One of the ten wrathful guardians, her mantra is a powerful tool to counter a magical onslaught.

¹¹³ This mantra shields practitioners from physical and spiritual harm, including diseases, negative energies, and malevolent forces.

¹¹⁴ Text not yet identified.

- needed per site.
- For the seven minor places (*gnas phran bu*), a single document suffices

When the human lifespan declines to between 70 and 60 years, seven incarnate beings will obtain seven treasure caches.

- There are 22 hidden lands located along the southern passageway, that extends from Khyung lung in Gu ge¹¹⁵ to Klong thang sgron ma¹¹⁶ in mDo khams. An additional three hidden lands are found along the northern route. Among these the most important are: Tsa ri in the east, 'Bras mo gshongs in the south and 'Brab mo khugs¹¹⁷ in the north.
- The 13 medium lands are situated along the southern corridor between Tsha ba'i rong in rGya mo¹¹⁸ and Pra tum in gTsang.¹¹⁹
- The minor lands are located between the more significant hidden lands. These are often inaccessible for ordinary individuals, especially Tsha byi in the north or g.Yu sa brag mo in the south.

Accessibility of hidden lands:

- mKhan pa lung in lHo brag:¹²⁰ easiest to occupy
- mKha' gro gling in Khumbu:¹²¹ easy to locate, someone might be there already
- Kun skyed kyi phug: difficult to find, easy to occupy
- Bud kyi mKhan pa lung:¹²² difficult to find, easy to occupy

¹¹⁵ Southwest of Mt. Kailash, once part of the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Zhang zhung.

¹¹⁶ One of the *ru gnon* temples, it was built to suppress the right palm of the hand of the *srin mo*. Sørensen & Hazod, 2005, p. 148.

¹¹⁷ It could refer to a hidden land somewhere in Byang district, near Dan gra and sTar sgo gangs, on the northern side of the sTar go range. It is spelled as 'Bras mo khud in another version, BEYUL GEN5, n. d., f. 5b.

¹¹⁸ Unidentified. There is a Tsha ba'i rong in rGyal rong, traditionally regarded as the place to which Vairocana was exiled. See Karmay, 1996a, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ BEYUL GEN5, n. d. f. 5b: *pra dum*. Same location as the temple, where rDor 'bum Chos kyi grags pa found the *Vase of Amṛta* and other treasures.

¹²⁰ mKhan pa lung on the Tibet-Bhutan border.

¹²¹ Located in Khumbu, Nepal. Identified with one of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's seven hidden lands, the Playground of the Dākinīs (Rol pa mkha' 'gro gling).

¹²² According to this text, Bud kyi mKhan pa lung is situated in the same direction as mKha' 'gro gling in Khum bu, near Bu le'i gangs in the southern borderland. In Padma gling pa's tradition, a hidden land bearing the same name is located on the Bhutanese side of the Tibet-Bhutan border. The stories recorded by Aris are set in that region.

- 'Bras mo gshongs:¹²³ easy place to live
- Tsa ri¹²⁴ in the east: like living in a royal palace
- Ding ding nag mo in Has:¹²⁵ distant and difficult to reach, yet easy to occupy

The three hidden lands that will undoubtedly be discovered in the future are:

1. Tsa ri gangs kyī ra ba:¹²⁶ is prophesied to be discovered by a rDzogs chen yogin, considered to be an incarnation of the eminent translator Vairocana. However, due to the negative karma accrued through sending Vairocana to exile, it is foretold that the land will ultimately be occupied by a Hinayāna practitioner.
2. 'Bras mo gshongs:¹²⁷ is predicted to be opened by three learned masters of Tibet, one of whom is a yogin devoted to the practice of Vajrakīla. Upon its discovery, three distinct mantra lineages are said to emerge within this region.
3. La phyi gangs kyī ra ba:¹²⁸ is prophesied to be opened by an emanation of Ācārya Jñāna.

¹²³ Identified with Sikkim, one of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's seven hidden lands, The Valley of Rice (Sbas yul 'Bras mo shong).

¹²⁴ The Dag pa shel ri ("Pure Crystal Mountain") and its surrounding area on the Tibetan side of today's border between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, India.

¹²⁵ In the BHUTAN version the text reads *Has kyī sbas yul ding mo*. The Tibetan toponym Has probably refers to the Haa valley (Had) in Western Bhutan.

¹²⁶ Tsa ri or rTsa ri is known in Tibetan texts also as rTswa ri, meaning "Herb Mountain." It is also identified with the Sanskrit Cāritra (originally the name of a southern port city on the Orissan coast), transcribed into Tibetan as Tsā ri tra. In Indian Tantric literature and Tibetan commentaries, Tsa ri is recognised as one of the 24 power places (*pīṭha*) or one of the eight great Tantric charnel grounds. See Huber 1999, pp. 82-83. While Huber's influential work does not specifically examine Tsa ri as a *sbas yul*, it remains a seminal contribution to the study of Tibetan sacred geography and mountain cult.

¹²⁷ Identified with Sikkim, Rig 'dzin rGod ldem is said to have spent fourteen years there during the 14th century, establishing temples and meditation centres in bKra shis sdings and near dPa' bo Huṃ ri. His reincarnation, Legs ldan rdo rje (1512–1625), discovered a *gter ma* at this site—the *mKha' 'gro'i mkha' lang ma'i rgyud*—in 1568 (Dokhampa, 2003). The three masters prophesied to open 'Bras mo gshongs are Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597–1653), Kaḥ thog Rig 'dzin chen po, and mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin (c. 1591–1656).

¹²⁸ Located southwest of Tibet, east of gNya' nang, La phyi, along with Ti se and Tsa ri, forms a trio of holy mountains associated with Cakrasaṃvara. La phyi is also closely linked to Mi la ras pa. It is identified with Godāvāri, one of the twenty-four Tantric power places (*pīṭha*). The 'Bri gung pa and 'Brug pa branches of the Dwags po bka' brgyud pa—following the instructions of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po (1110–1170), one of the three main disciples of sGam po pa—were instrumental in establishing this sacred geographical cult at Ti se (Mt. Kailash), La phyi and Tsa ri. See Huber, 1997, p. 242.

Additional hidden lands that will be revealed only, when karmic conditions are ripe include:

4. The Happy Cave of Ku thang¹²⁹ will be occupied by a realised practitioner of Hayagrīva, coming from bKra thum in gTsang.
5. Yol mo gangs kyi ra ba:¹³⁰ it will be occupied by an accomplished Guru Vidyādhara (Bla ma rig 'dzin)¹³¹ practitioner, coming from the west of bKra thum in gTsang.¹³²
6. sMan sha khum bu'i rong:¹³³ it will be occupied by an accomplished Supreme Mother Goddess (Che mchog ma mo) practitioner, coming from Tho yor nag po in Byang.¹³⁴
7. mKhan pa lung in Bud:¹³⁵ it will be occupied by an adept of Vajravīdhara,¹³⁶ coming from the west of Ru lag rgyang.¹³⁷
8. Ding mo¹³⁸ will be occupied by an accomplished Mañjuśrī Yamāntaka practitioner, coming from Nyang ro.
9. mKhan pa lung in lHo brag:¹³⁹ it will be occupied by a Heruka practitioner coming from bSam yas.
2. 'Bras mo gshongs, the king of all hidden lands, will be opened gradually by seven people when human lifespan is decreasing from sixty to fifty.
1. Tsa ri will be gradually opened by three.
3. La phyi will be revealed by two.
5. Yol mo will be revealed by three.
4. sKyid kyi yul¹⁴⁰ in Ku thang will be revealed by two.¹⁴¹

¹²⁹ Kutang is a district located in northern Nepal near the Tibetan border. It is said that sBas yul sKyid mo lung is situated in this area. Aris, 1975, p. 56.

¹³⁰ Identified with Helambu, Nepal. Tibetan tradition suggests that Yol mo gangs ra and Padma tshal, one of the seven hidden lands of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem are the same.

¹³¹ One of the bKa' brgyad deities, who embodies the eight vidhyādhara of India, or the essence of Padmasambhava.

¹³² It refers to sNgags 'chang Shākya bzang po (1480–later than 1540). See Gelle 2026b in this volume.

¹³³ Everest region of Nepal.

¹³⁴ It is the birthplace of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem.

¹³⁵ Hidden land on the southern borderlands, partly in Khumbu.

¹³⁶ rDo rje rnam 'joms, a semi-wrathful form of Vajrapāṇi.

¹³⁷ Ru lag refers to an administrative district corresponding to the southwest of gTsang, see Uray, 1960, p. 32. rGyang is the name of the place where Gram pa rgyang is located, one of the famous *ru gnon* temples pinning down the left hip of the *srin mo*.

¹³⁸ Has kyi Ding mo, or Ding ding nag mo, Western Bhutan.

¹³⁹ Hidden land in southern Tibet near the Bhutanese border.

¹⁴⁰ Same as sKyid mo lung.

¹⁴¹ It refers to sKyid mo lung discovered first by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem. The main *gter ston* associated with the site is Gar dbang rdo rje (1640–1685) who discovered *gter ma* there.

Each of the remaining hidden lands will be opened by one person.¹⁴²

Due to the progressive decline of virtue in the final era, access to the necessary transmissions and oral instructions required for entering these sacred hidden places (*sbas yul*) will become increasingly difficult.

Q4. How does one search for the three hidden lands in the upper, lower, and middle regions?

A4.1. People will go to the hidden lands only when human lifespan has declined to 50 years. The three most significant hidden lands¹⁴³ are located along the frontier regions of Mon, between Tshongs 'du¹⁴⁴ in gTsang and sPra dum.

A4.2. Recommended practices for overcoming obstacles:
Practitioners are advised to engage in the meditative and ritual practices of Yamāntaka, Vajrakīla, and Heruka, as well as the sādhana practice of Hayagrīva and the Supreme Mother Goddess (Che mchog Ma mo), in order to eliminate hindrances to accessing hidden lands.

A4.3. Location of material treasures and instructions for establishing a network:

For those going to 'Bras mo gshongs: a treasure of gold is said to be located in Co ro prad, intended for the construction of a temple in Tsha mo rong. Along the line of Gang can mdzod lnga¹⁴⁵ sTag rtse ri,¹⁴⁶ which demarcates the border of Tibet, eight temples should be constructed and populated with monks. A retreat centre should be established in the heart of 'Bras mo gshongs.

According to the prophecy, Tibet will be attacked from the east by foreign armies on three separate occasions. Foreign armies will reach dBus and gTsang but will be unable to penetrate the southern land of lHo ka. Subsequently, when Mongols are foretold to

¹⁴² The numbering may appear confusing at first, but it is intentional. These two paragraphs refer to nine hidden lands; however, some of these lands are mentioned more than once. To prevent misunderstanding, the same number is assigned to each land upon its second mention.

¹⁴³ La phyi, 'Bras mo gshongs, and Tsa ri.

¹⁴⁴ In the story of the Ten Men of dBus and gTsang ordained by dGongs pa rab gsal (832–915), Bu ston recounts how mGur mo in gTsang rose to prominence as a renowned marketplace, see Obermiller, 1931, p. 203.

¹⁴⁵ The third highest mountain of the world, and the sacred mountain of Sikkim. Sikkim's guardian deity, mDzod lnga resides on its top with his acolyte Yab bdud.

¹⁴⁶ The highest of the five peaks of Gangs chen mdzod lnga.

traverse the entire Tibetan plateau, retreat into 'Bras mo gshongs will become imperative.

The prophecy further delineates mineral treasures intended to facilitate journeys to various hidden lands, including Bud, Khumbu, La phyi, Yol mo gangs ra, and others. These concealed resources are specifically designated to support spiritual practitioners in their travels to remote Himalayan locations for the purposes of meditative retreat or pilgrimage. Beyond merely identifying the location of these treasures, the text also offers practical guidance on their utilization, particularly for the renovation or construction of temples, stupas, and rest houses along the routes. The enumeration of these treasure sites reveals a visionary schema in which both spiritual and material provisions are anticipated as essential for enabling access to the hidden lands.

It is a noteworthy parallel that Guru Chos dbang (1212–1270), in his *gTer 'byung chen mo*, includes among the outer treasures “hidden wealth to buy food for Dharma practitioners.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, following his consolidation of power in 1358, Byang chub rgyal mtshan is known to have established rest houses and provision caches along pilgrimage routes surrounding the sacred mountains of Tsa ri and Kailash.¹⁴⁸ It is evident from biographical sources (*rnam thar*), that many hidden lands served as retreat sites for earlier generations of yogis even before they were formally opened.¹⁴⁹

A4.4. The list of provision caches is followed by a description detailing the method for protecting bSam yas using a poison wind amulet. It prescribes that a man should smear his head with grease, apply sandalwood ointment to his nostrils, and place a leather casket containing poisonous gas beneath the threshold of bSam yas. This is intended to safeguard the site from destruction by a “demon” army. According to the prophecy, the army will disperse

¹⁴⁷ Gyatso, 1994, p. 276.

¹⁴⁸ Shakabpa, 1967, pp. 81-82.

¹⁴⁹ Aris (1980, pp. 61-62) notes that the high valley of mKhan pa lung (or mKhan pa ljongs), located just south of the Tibetan border in Bhutan, had served as a site for spiritual retreat since at least the latter half of the 13th century. It is listed as one of the places where the early rDzogs chen master Me long rdo rje (1243–1303) meditated. Later, following a dream revelation, Padma gling pa (1450–1521) journeyed to the same place to extract a treasure, the *Guidebook to mKhan pa lung*. Upon his return to the village, however, he was confronted by the Nas pa people, who demanded the return of the treasure, claiming it had been taken from their land. A resolution was reached only after Padma gling pa destroyed their crops by sending hail and secured the support of the Chus pa people. Then finally the dispute was settled, and the Nas pas offered the land of mKhan pa lung to Padma gling pa.

and return to its own land after three years, ushering in a period of 30 years of happiness in Tibet. However, in the final times, such measures will no longer be effective against the invading forces, and the people are advised to seek refuge in the valleys of southern Tibet.

A4.5. Tibetans living in different regions should flee to the following places:

- From dBus and gTsang people should go to lHo ka,¹⁵⁰
- from Byang people should escape to the southern gorges,
- from Byang Dang ra to the northern side of the sTar sgo range,¹⁵¹
- and mentions invading armies advancing from the west, destroying Western Tibet and killing people.

Somewhat abruptly, Padmasambhava adds another prophetic statement: "Oh, great king! Tibet's suffering will begin when, in sTod, in Mang yul Gung thang, the royal line is severed by the knife.¹⁵² The disaster in Tibet will commence with a second killing by the knife. When the third murder occurs,¹⁵³ it will mark the end of Tibet's happiness, then, flee to the hidden lands and the southern valleys."

This passage is frequently cited in sources discussing hidden lands,¹⁵⁴ and there is considerable speculation regarding which kings and historical periods it references. However, within the *General Introduction*, the passage appears to pertain to the kings of Gung thang, who were killed during the 13th to 14th centuries.

A4.6. A parallel is then drawn with India's fate during the Age of Decline, in which Buddhist temples are said to be destroyed by invading armies. According to the text, seven sūtras of the Buddha *Śākyamuni* contain prophecies concerning the final times. From

¹⁵⁰ lHo ka denotes the region of southern Tibet stretching from the Yar klungs valley southward to lHo brag.

¹⁵¹ rTa rgo rin po che (father/mountain) and Dang ra g.yu mtsho (mother/lake) are renowned pilgrimage sites for the followers of the Bon tradition in the Byang thang region of Tibet. They are also revered as locations where Padmasambhava concealed spiritual treasures (*gter ma*). For a detailed analysis of their sacred geography see Bellezza, 1997.

¹⁵² It refers to the first time, when a Gung thang king was murdered. It could refer to dGon po lde (ca. 1235?), who during a war between Gung thang and Ya tshé, fled to sKyid grong, and was killed there. Jackson, 1976, p. 44.

¹⁵³ King Phun tshogs lde (1338–1370), as mentioned earlier, was killed by his father-in-law. See Jackson, 1976, p. 47.

¹⁵⁴ RG3, 2003, p. 23.

among these texts, *The Royal Sūtra of Prophecies* (*Lung bstan rgyal po'i mdo*)¹⁵⁵ is cited. In this sūtra, the Buddha tells Śāriputra that during the final period, people should seek refuge in the region of Mount Dan tig, at the source of the Dan tig river, on remote islands in the outer ocean, and in secluded forested valleys.

Imre Galambos has proposed that Dan tig is likely a transcription of the Chinese toponym, Tante檀特. In collaboration with Sam van Schaik, he conducted a detailed study of the term, arguing that it refers to the place of exile of Prince Sudāna,¹⁵⁶ which may have motivated the naming of a monastery in Amdo, known as the refuge of the so-called 'Three Men from Khams,'¹⁵⁷ who sought asylum there during the Era of Fragmentation.

Although I have not been able to identify *The Royal Sūtra of Prophecies*, it may be a text translated from Sanskrit into Chinese and later into Tibetan during the first dissemination of the Teaching. The citation included in the *General Introduction* portrays Mount Dan tig as a place of refuge in India—a sanctuary for preserving the Dharma during times of crisis.

Q5. How can Tibetans escape from the arrows of Māra?¹⁵⁸

A5.1. About the social disintegration and low morals of the final five-hundred years, similar to A2.2.

A5.2. About the number of people reaching the main hidden lands and attaining liberation, those, who die of hunger, disease or killed by demon armies.

A5.3. Padmasambhava is giving advice to people who will live in the final five-hundred years to go to the southern borderlands and find the hidden lands which he blessed, and where he concealed important treasures, and appointed obedient servants.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Unidentified text. The same section of this sūtra is quoted by IHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1653) in vol. 3 of his *gsung 'bum*, in a guidebook (*lam yig*) of 'Bras mo gshongs, see LHATSUN, 1974, p. 432.

¹⁵⁶ The *Sudāna Sūtra* (*Rgyal bu don grub kyi mdo*) survives both in Chinese and Tibetan versions among the Dunhuang manuscripts (IOL Tib J 76), and it is also included in the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur. See Galambos & van Schaik, 2015 and <http://earlytibet.com/2010/07/15/amdo-notes-ii/>.

¹⁵⁷ See fn. 104.

¹⁵⁸ The arrows of Māra refer to the *kleśas* (see A2.2.), mental afflictions that obscure the mind and give rise to unwholesome actions, obstructing the path to liberation. These afflictions and their resulting negative actions are considered the root causes of the sufferings characterising the Age of Decline.

¹⁵⁹ It refers to local deities, who were subjugated by Padmasambhava to be the protectors of the Dharma, and they were entrusted to protect the treasures (*qter ma*).

Colophon: Khri srong lde btsan compiled an inventory of all the prophecies, offered a mandala to his guru, and concealed the treasures. They were concealed halfway up the mountain in Byang Zang zang lha brag. Upon his departure from Tibet, Padmasambhava is said to have prophesied the future discovery of these treasures, predicting that a man of virtuous karma would discover the text on the eastern side of the mountain and thereby open the path to seven hidden lands in the south. The second colophon states that the treasure was taken out by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem in Byang Zang zang lha brag.

6. Authorship

According to the tradition, treasure teachings—like the *General Introduction*—can be found in physical form, or experienced in dreams or visions, which work as a trigger in the treasure revealer's mind, helping him to recall a teaching. Then they are decoded and written down by the treasure-master. Padmasambhava is regarded as the “author” in the sense of being the original source of the revelation, while the *gter ston*—who deciphers the symbolic code and formalizes the scripture—is likewise recognized as an “author” of the textual composition. This model of dual attribution challenges conventional Western notions of authorship.¹⁶⁰ Like many works of Tibetan literature, treasure texts are typically compilations, assembled from blocks of teachings drawn from a range of sources—often incorporating material that is earlier, or even of ancient origin.¹⁶¹ Their primary purpose is the transmission of an established spiritual truth.

Although little is known about the earliest use of the term *sbas yul* in Tibetan sources, Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270) refers in his *gTer 'byung chen mo* to “entire valleys that are hidden as treasures, to be used in the future as retreats for Dharma practitioners.”¹⁶² This description may represent a prototype for the later development of the cult surrounding hidden lands. Klong chen Rab 'byams pa (1308–1363) employs the term *sbas yul* in his eulogy of the Bum thang region,¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ This also presents further challenges in English translations of *gter ma* texts, where the list of associated figures or “authors” often includes Padmasambhava, who originally bestowed the teaching; Ye shes mtsho rgyal or others, who recorded it; the *gter ston*, who discovered it centuries later; the lama, who offered commentary or transmission; and the translators, who rendered it into English.

¹⁶¹ Robert Mayer found that one of Nyang ral Nyi ma'i 'od zer's (12th c.) treasure works is a verbatim republishing of a the Dunhuang ext, IOL TibJ 331 III (c. tenth century). See Mayer, 2015, pp. 228-229.

¹⁶² Gyatso, 1994, p. 276.

¹⁶³ Klong chen pa spent six years in exile in Bhutan, residing in places such as Thar pa gling in Bum thang. He left Tibet following the failure of the 1358 revolt by the 'Bri

where he spent several years in exile, to evoke a spiritual paradise in which ideal natural features and human virtues converge to create optimal conditions for religious practice. However, the mystical dimensions that come to define later *sbas yul* literature from the time of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, are absent from his portrayal.¹⁶⁴

A substantial corpus of manuscripts concerning hidden lands (*sbas yul*) most of which are attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, circulates widely throughout the Himalayan region. Preliminary research on a selection of these texts suggests that many were likely composed later than Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's time, incorporating material sometimes from various authors. Some may have originated locally and were later ascribed to the lineage's founder.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, they are regarded as the authentic works of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, a traditional view that gains credence when considered alongside Klong chen pa's criteria for determining the authenticity and reliability of a doctrine. Teachings are authentic if:

1. They are not the result of personal, momentary invention, but represent the mental lineage of the Buddhas of the three times—that is, they ultimately originate from the Buddhas themselves.
2. They embody the symbolic lineage of knowledge-holders who have received the transmission of teachings bearing ultimate meaning, thus ensuring that the doctrines are not of provisional but of definitive significance.
3. Finally, they represent the oral lineage of specific historical individuals, transmitted in an unbroken chain throughout history. The authenticity of the teachings requires the concurrent presence of these three transmission lineages.¹⁶⁶

However, from an academic perspective, a more robust historical conclusion necessitates a critical reassessment of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's historical persona, as well as an investigation into whether the *sbas yul* teachings later attributed to him can be substantiated as originating during his lifetime. One promising approach would be to systematically compare a large corpus of *sbas yul* texts, exploring their intertextual relationships and thematic patterns. These could then be

gung bka' bryud against the Phag mo gru pa. His exile was likely due his close association with the 'Bri gung sgom chen, Kun dga' rin chen.

¹⁶⁴ kLong chen rab 'byams pa, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Scholars often acknowledged an uncertainty about the origin and authorship of these *sbas yul* texts attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem and noticed borrowings from other works. See Aris 1979, p. 82; Orofino 1991, pp. 245-247.

¹⁶⁶ Agócs, 2025, pp. 81-82.

contextualised through a comparative analysis with works attributed to other prominent treasure revealers who have journeyed to hidden lands and composed guidebooks describing them, such as Padma gling pa (1450–1521), 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585–1656),¹⁶⁷ Rig 'dzin bDud 'dul rdo rje (1615–1672),¹⁶⁸ Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597–1653),¹⁶⁹ among others. Additionally, it would be important to examine how these texts align with or diverge from major rNying ma works of the 14th century, such as the *Mani bka' 'bum*, the *Padma bka' thang*, and canonical literature addressing the theme of the age of decline. Comparative analysis between the sources of *sbas yul* texts and those of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's other works may also yield insights into questions of authorship, attribution and doctrinal continuity.

7. Geography

Another interpretive challenge lies in the geographical identification of hidden lands. As seen from the annotated outline of the *General Introduction*, although it refers to specific Byang gter practices and prophecies concerning future discoverers—those who will follow this tradition—it also presents a synthesis of earlier Tibetan sacred geographies: power-places, sites associated with the ancient Tibetan mountain cult, earlier Bon and Buddhist traditions, and Himalayan valleys, some of which would later be identified as the seven hidden lands of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem. It is noteworthy that Ti se, La phyi, and Tsa ri are frequently referenced in the *General Introduction*. These three sacred mountains (*gnas ri*) had been venerated long before the emergence of the Byang gter lineage. During Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's life, they served as prominent pilgrimage routes and meditation sites under the control of the 'Bri gung and 'Brug pa bka' brgyud traditions. Significantly, however, the *General Introduction* designated a different triad—La phyi, 'Bras mo gshongs, and Tsa ri—as the three principal hidden lands, prophesied to be definitely revealed in the future.

In the course of my earlier textual research on sBas yul Yol mo gangs ra, I identified a striking instance of intertextuality: a passage describing the hidden land of Yol mo appears verbatim in a text concerning the hidden land of mKhan pa lung. This shared

¹⁶⁷ <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Jatson-Nyingpo/11572>.

¹⁶⁸ 'Ja' tshon snying po's disciple. When the Qoshot Mongols overran Central Tibet in 1642, 'Ja' tshon snying po appointed him to open the Hidden Land of Padma bkod. Sardar-Afkhani, 1996 p. 2.; Ehrhard, 1994, pp. 227-239.

¹⁶⁹ Important disciple of 'Ja' tshon snying po and Rig 'dzin bDud 'dul rdo rje. He was urged by them and a prophecy to open sBas yul 'Bras mo ljongs, and he completed the task in 1646. He established an unbroken lineage of rDzogs chen practice in Sikkim. See Mullard, 2003, Mullard, 2011.

description, employed to designate two ostensibly distinct sacred geographies, raises important questions regarding the fluidity and portability of textual representations of hidden lands.

In another case, I examined a prophetic certificate (*lung byang*) related to sBas yul Yol mo gangs ra, entitled the *Heart Essence*,¹⁷⁰ which is attributed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem. The text concludes with the statement: "This was the short summary of the snowy land of the northern gate of 'Bras mo gshongs."¹⁷¹ Notably, however, sBas yul Yol mo gangs ra is not mentioned in any extant biographies of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem. The toponym Yol mo, however, does appear in his biography as a geographical reference:

The *Gab pa snying thig lde mig*¹⁷² says:
 If signs of Tibet's decline appear,
 Seek the land between Yol mo above and Gro mo below—
 the precious 'Bras gshongs lies in the middle.
 Whatever omens may arise, go there!¹⁷³

It is striking that both texts refer to Yol mo as a location neighbouring¹⁷⁴ Bras gshongs despite well-established geographical identifications to the contrary. 'Bras gshongs or 'Bras mo gshongs is commonly associated with Sikkim, Gro mo (or Gro mo khud) with the Chumbi Valley situated directly east of Sikkim, and Yol mo with Helambu, located approximately 300 km west of Sikkim in a straight line. Nevertheless, the *General Introduction* situates Yol mo gangs ra near La phyi, aligning with its modern identification. Intriguingly, there is no mention of Padma 'tshal, one of the seven *sbas yul* of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem identified later with Yol mo gangs ra.

¹⁷⁰ The full title is *Yol mo gangs kyi ra ba'i lung byang snying gi tikka*, and it is included in the *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang ma 'ong lung bstan*. (RG6 & Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, 2003).

¹⁷¹ RG6 & Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, 2003, p. 43: *ces pa 'bras gshongs byang sgo'i gangs lung mdor bris so*.

¹⁷² *Key of the hidden heart essence*. This text is not identified yet, although I found another mention of it in the colophon of *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi lam yig le'u drug pa lde mig 'khrul gyi dgu skor bdog* (BDRC: MW1KG818_097461), where it is mentioned that it is a prophetic teaching by Padmasambhava hidden in Byang zang zang gi brag and discovered by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem.

¹⁷³ *sNying gi lde mig las/ bod phung ba'i rtags byung nal/ yol mo stod la gro mo smad/ bar yul rin chen 'bras gshongs/ gang gi stags byung de ru rgyug/* My translation is based on the transcription of the rGod ldem's *rnam thar* in Herweg, 1994, pp. 225-226.

¹⁷⁴ The colophon of RG6 calls it the 'northern gate' (*byang sgo*), and the biography says *stod*.

	Name of the Hidden Land	Geoloc. in the <i>General Introduction</i>	Modern identification	Revealer
1	Tsa ri Tsa ri gangs kyi ra ba	in the east	Arunachal Pradesh & Tibet border	three people will open it
2	'Bras mo gshongs	in the south	Sikkim	seven people will open it
3	La phyi La phyi gangs kyi ra ba	same direction as Yol mo	Border of Nepal & Tibet	- emanation of Ācārya Jñāna - two people will open it
4	Ku thang skyid kyi phug sKyid mo lung sKyid kyi yul	Ku thang kyi rong	Manaslu region, Nepal	- realized man who will come from bKra thum in g'Tsang - two people will open it
5	Yol mo Yol mo gangs kyi ra ba	same direction as La phyi	Helambu, Nepal	three people will open it
6	sMan sha Khum bu'i rong mKha' 'gro gling in Khum bu	same direction as Bud	Khumbu, Nepal	realized master of the supreme Heruka Ma mo
7	Bud kyi mKhan pa lung Bud rong	same direction as Khum bu near Bu le'i gangs	Tibet-Nepal border	realized master of the propitiation of rDo rje rNam 'joms
8	Has kyi sbas yul Ding ding nag mo sBas yul Ding mo	far away sPa gro Bum thang	Western Bhutan	realized master of Mañjuśrī Yamāntaka; coming from Nyang ro
9	IHo brag rGyal gyi mKhan pa lung, IHo brag mKhar chu'i rong	IHo brag mKhar chu refuge for the practitioners of mChims bu	IHo brag, southern Tibet bordering Bhutan	master of the practice of Heruka, coming from bSam yas
10	Byang 'Brab mo khugs Byang 'Bras mo khud	Byang; near Dang ra and sTar go gangs; northern side of sTar go gangs	Northwestern part of Tibet, Byang	---
11	Lha pho brang sdengs	---	---	mentioned only once: easy to find, difficult to liberate
12	Ti se Ti se gangs	east from the snow mountain that looks like a market gathering of gods	Mt. Kailash	mentioned that three hundred practitioners will attain liberation there during the final times
13	dBus kyi sbas yul Nags rong phug bKa' ma lung in Dvags po	same direction as 'Bras mo gshongs	Central Tibet	---

Fig. 1. — Overview of the Hidden Lands mentioned in the General Introduction¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Of the seven Hidden Lands mentioned in the *Ga'u bdun ma*, five appear under identical names in the *General Introduction* and are highlighted in bold in the

A similar ambiguity arises in the references to mKhan pa lung in the *General Introduction*: rGyal gyi mKhan pa lung is described as being located in southern Tibet, in lHo brag, while Bud kyi mKhan pa lung is said to lie in the direction of Khum bu. However, in the list of the *Ga'u bdun ma*—the principal source for Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's seven hidden lands—rGyal gyi mKhan pa lung is instead placed in Bud. These examples reflect a broader pattern of fluidity in the identification and localization of sacred landscapes. It appears plausible that the locations of *sbas yul*—like those of sacred sites of India and Tibet—were historically subject to processes of transposition, recontextualization or re-identification.

Franz-Karl Ehrhard encapsulated the nature of this phenomenon succinctly: "I shall venture the conclusion, that the text material on which the [*sbas yul*] myth is based is part of a literature that passed in various versions through the hands of various authors and commentators. In the process it was easy for overlapping traditions and differing ways of defining geographical reality to arise."¹⁷⁶

8. Conclusion

The prophecy of the *General Introduction* (*sPyi'i them byang*) foretelling Tibet's suffering through foreign invasions, internal strife, epidemics, and social disintegration, can be contextualized within the conditions of the 13-14th century—specifically the Yuan dynasty and the subsequent Phag mo gru pa period. According to the text, the gradual revelation of hidden treasures begins in the 13th century, coinciding with the onset of the Yuan rule, and these *gter ma* revelations give rise to the notion of hidden lands, and it is only after the Yuan era, in the second half of the 14th century, that efforts to locate such hidden lands begin to emerge sporadically.

While the text does reference internal turmoil, it notably refrains from naming specific political authorities or religious factions as sources of disorder. Instead, it identifies foreign invasion—particularly the Hor (Mongols) and the sTod hor (Chagatai Khanate)—as the primary threats to Tibet. In its portrayal of the country's condition, the *General Introduction* evokes a profound sense of crisis, existential dread, and life-threatening peril. These dire circumstances, it suggests, can be addressed only through drastic action—most significantly through the departure in search of hidden lands. Although the prophecy initially envisions refuge within secluded

accompanying table. *Gro mo khud* is absent, and *Yol mo gangs ra* appears in place of *Padma tshäl*.

¹⁷⁶ Ehrhard, 1997, p. 341.

mountain valleys throughout Tibet, as it unfolds and addresses the final phase of the Dark Age, it calls for a more radical response: the withdrawal from established religious and political centres in order to establish new communities on the margins. These peripheral spaces are portrayed as sanctuaries where the Dharma, along with the lineage of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, can be safeguarded within a more conducive and protective environment.¹⁷⁷

The *General Introduction* demonstrates a good geographical knowledge of Tibet and its borderlands, indicating that its author was familiar with these regions and the trans-Himalayan routes that connected Tibet with its neighbours. The inclusion of multiple lists of hidden lands suggests the possible incorporation of pre-Byang gter sources and pre-existing catalogues of *sbas yul*. The text prophesies that seven incarnate figures will each discover a cache of hidden treasures during a period when the average human lifespan has declined to between seventy and sixty years.¹⁷⁸ It further states that migration to hidden lands will commence only when the average lifespan has fallen to fifty years. Although the precise duration between the initial revelation of these treasures and the eventual discovery of the hidden lands cannot be determined with the help of these eschatological terms, historical developments appear to loosely correspond with the structure of the prophecy. Notably, textual references to hidden lands began to emerge in the 14th century, whereas the actual opening of the majority of the seven hidden lands associated with Rig 'dzin rGod ldem did not begin until the 17th century. In light of this, it is noteworthy that the *General Introduction* is recorded among the Byang gter teachings on future prophecies and hidden lands in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Records of Teachings received*.¹⁷⁹

Regardless of its date of composition, the *General Introduction* offers a glimpse into a pre-existing tradition of sacred lands predating Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, indicating that earlier Bon, rNying ma, and Dwags

¹⁷⁷ While Byang gter yogis had been meditating in the Himalayan region since the early phases of the tradition, the significant increase in the number of hidden lands (*sbas yul*) revealed during the 17th century indicates a deliberate dissemination of the Northern Treasures (*Byang gter*) tradition. This pattern becomes even more pronounced following the Dzungar invasion of 1717, during which the principal *Byang gter* monastery, rDo rje brag, was destroyed and its abbot killed. In the aftermath, reports of Tibetans relocating to the southern borderlands become more frequent, suggesting a renewed emphasis on peripheral sanctuaries as sites of refuge and religious continuity.

¹⁷⁸ According to Buddhist cosmology, the human lifespan was one-hundred years during the time of the historical Buddha and is believed to gradually decline, ultimately reaching as low as ten years at the end of the kali yuga.

¹⁷⁹ 5th DALAI LAMA, 1971, f. 329.

po bka' brgyud traditions also contributed to the conceptual development of the *sbas yul* cult of the Northern Treasures tradition.

The significance of the *General Introduction* lies in its function as a self-legitimising discourse of the visionary and mystical conceptualisation of *sbas yul* developed by the Northern Treasures tradition grounded in the cult of Padmasambhava. The text not only prophesies the future appearance of a figure—identified in the colophon as Rig 'dzin rGod ldem—who will reveal seven hidden lands along Tibet's southern borderlands, but also provides detailed descriptions of the routes to these sanctuaries, along with protective rituals and practices designed to safeguard Dharma practitioners on the way. In doing so, it functions as an esoteric manual or 'key' for locating potential places of refuge. A key waiting to find its corresponding 'door' in the future.

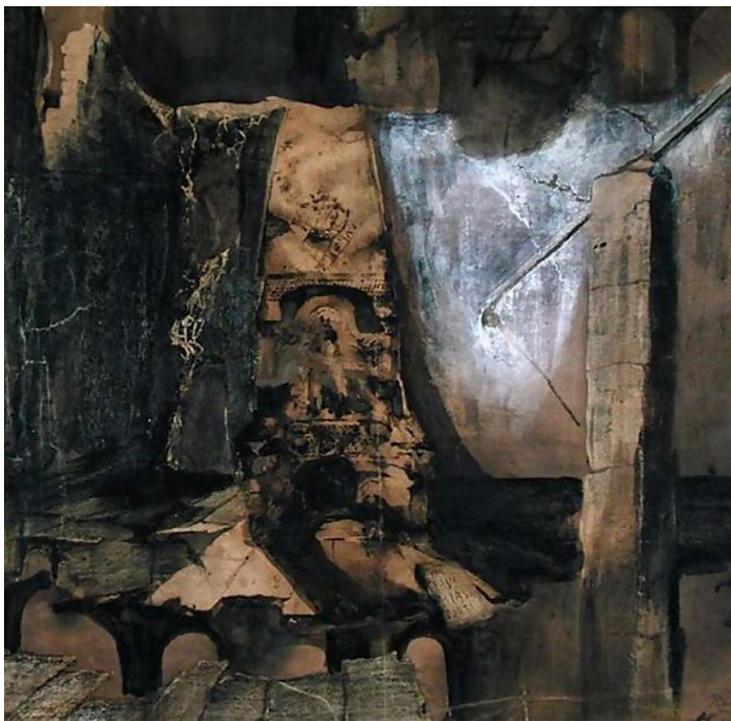


Fig. 2. — *Here the Key, Elsewhere the Door* by Victor Hugo

Completed in 1871, the painting dates to the period immediately following Victor Hugo's return to France from Guernsey, where he had spent fifteen years in exile.

Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris

(Wikimedia Commons)

List of Abbreviations

BDRC	Buddhist Digital Resource Center
D	Derge (sDe dge) Edition of the Tibetan Canon
IOL	India Office Library
LTWA	Library of Tibetan Works and Archives
PTS	Pāli Text Society
T	Taishō Tripiṭaka

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