

THE FORTRESS-MONASTERY OF BRAG MKHAR: AN ANAMNESIS

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While the old fortress-monastery of Brag mkhar¹ still occupies a dramatic position in the barren land of Spiti (*sPi ti*) today, its occurrences in literary sources, historical chronicles and inscriptions confine it to a ghost-like figure. However, as the former capital of Spiti it must have played, without any doubt, a significant role in the socio-political and religious landscape of the valley.

This preliminary report is an attempt to address this discrepancy. It records the occurrences of Brag mkhar as a political and religious centre of the Spiti valley in primary sources and secondary literature over a period of about thousand years. However, it does not purport to be exhaustive given the difficulty in gathering all the documents pertaining to West Tibet and the means at our disposal. Each entry is presented following its chronological significance and is completed with contextualizing notes, remarks and archaeological observations. This procedure is therefore not meant to establish the historicity of the place but rather to disentangle the relationship between the feudal principality and the religious establishment of Brag mkhar within the larger frame of the western Himalayan kingdoms.

1 The spelling retained in this document follows the name of the current monastic complex Brag mkhar bkra shis chos gling. The capital of Spiti is also recorded under other denominations such as Brang mkhar , Grang mkhar or Grang dkar in our sources.

THE SPITI VALLEY: A PAWN ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL LAND OF WEST TIBET ²

The Spiti valley is geographically located at a junction between the Greater Himalaya, the Tibetan plateau and the Indian hill state of Himachal Pradesh. It is formed by the Spiti River which rises on the slopes of the Kunzum pass (4551m) and ends its route as a tributary of the Sutlej River about hundred-fifty kilometres south-eastwards. Located on the Tibetan border and flanked by Kinnaur, Lahul, Zaskar and Ladakh, the Spiti valley lies at an altitude ranging from 3000 to 4000 meters above sea level. Despite the harshness of the climate and the rugged topography of the area, the Spiti valley was an important centre for trade and communication between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and West Tibet.

2 The following introduction does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of Spiti which still needs to be written.



Fig. 06: Panorama picture of the monastery complex and the old part of the village with the castle of the Nono on its top; LN 2010



Fig. 07: The confluence of the Spiti and Pin rivers. View from Brag mkhar. July 2010

After the mid 18th century it suffered many invasions and raids that were often meant to secure or extend commercial control and trade conditions. The network of trade routes that criss-crossed the western Himalayas also bears witness to the intimate connection between merchants, religious communities and rich patrons. The vitality of the religious establishments that spread along them can be best exemplified by the monastery and prestigious translation centre of Tabo (KLIMBURG-SALTER 1997).

Furthermore, the presence of religious complexes in Spiti was part of a larger phenomenon of pacification and Tibetanization of West Tibet which started round 986 when lHa bla ma Ye shes 'od initiated the conversion of his subjects to Buddhism (VITALI 1996). The native inhabitants of the Spiti valley and neighbouring areas were culturally and linguistically different from the new Tibetan ruling élite that favoured the latest diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*) which has been described as a massive intellectual and cultural process (KLIMBURG-SALTER 2005). This process of acculturation included the foundation and edification of chapels, temples and monastic centres as part of a domestication of the landscape. In addition, it involved a substantial effort in revising and translating Buddhist works written mainly in Sanskrit or in other Indian languages. This Buddhist renaissance and religious conversion which took place around the millennium in the western Himalayas was to create not only a literature but a new culture (TUCCI 1988). This could be only achieved with the formation of a class of literati (*lo tswa ba*) and the help of Buddhist masters and preachers. Around 1020, two hundred youths from different areas were chosen to become the actors of this cultural movement. Thirty of them came from Spiti.³

³ Similarly, from mNga' ris skor gsum, as two hundred youths were gathered, who had considerable wisdom, bright intelligence, diligent mind, good heart, faith in Buddhism and fondness for the triple jewel, altogether two hundred, they were delivered on the path of liberation in the footsteps of [Ye she ,od's] two sons. Consequently, one hundred from Gu ge, forty from sPu hrang, thirty from Mar yul, thirty from Pi ti, altogether two hundred, were gathered. + From the Ngari Chronicles (VITALI 1996:59,113, 233).

The history of Buddhism in Spiti can be divided into several periods of religious and political influences which are summarized in a few words below. The first period, as we have briefly outlined, goes back to the establishment of the Kingdoms of Guge Purang (*Gu ge Pu hrang*) and the second diffusion of Buddhism in West Tibet which took place in the late 10th and 11th century.

The first half of the 12th century was marked by the ravages of the Garlogpa (*Gar log pa*) invasions, a term which is believed to designate Muslim Qarakhanid Turks who settled in a neighbouring territory north of Guge.

The next period is characterized by the presence of hermits and meditators in West Tibet, belonging to the Kagyupa school (*bKa' brgyud pa*) and whose main figure and founder is the well-known and celebrated yogi Mi la res pa (1040 – 1123). Although of little political weight and rather unobtrusive in the religious landscape, its '*Bri gung pa* branch found increasing visibility in Ladakh and Guge where it was eventually defeated by the Sakyapa (*Sa skya pa*) in 1290. The Sakyapa establishment, under the sovereignty of the Mongols, ruled from the second half of the 13th century until the Gelugpa (*dGe lugs pa*) ascendancy in the 15th century.

This last period of religious effervescence is vital to understand the distribution of Tibetan monasticism and the forces at work in the western Himalayas up to the mid 19th century when Spiti, Lahul and Ladakh went under British rule. The rise of the Gelugpa order following the teachings of its charismatic founder and main exponent Tsong kha pa (1357 – 1419) not only involved large number of adherents, who would soon constitute the largest celibate monk communities in the history of Buddhist monasticism, but attracted the attention of aristocratic families and patrons, too. Last but not least, the incarnate lineage of the Dalai-Lamas and its proximity with the central power of Lhasa (*lHa sa*) promoted this school to the rank of state religion (*dGan' ldan pho brang*).⁴

The religious hegemony of the Gelugpa order, with its prestigious monastic universities and extensive curriculum, attracted monks from all over the Himalayan Range. After completing their scholastic training, these monks almost invariably returned to their native place in order to disseminate their doctrine. Thus, among the most active followers of Tsong kha pa, three of them were native of West Tibet and belonged to a group of six masters who were collectively remembered by the tradition as the "Six banners who diffused the teachings to the borderlands" (*bstan pa phyogs mthar spel ba'i dar chen drug*).⁵

As a kind of a buffer zone between the different lands and authorities that competed for political supremacy, religious hegemony and commercial control, Spiti passed again under the nominal control of Ladakh for brief periods during the reigns of kings bKra shis rNam rgyal (c.1555 – 1575) and Seng ge rNam rgyal (c.1616 – 1642) (PETECH 1977).

⁴ On the formation of the Tibetan state religion linked to the hegemony of the Gelugpa school and its mass monasticism see McCleary and van der Kuijp (MCCLEARY & VAN DER KUIJP 2008) and Goldstein (GOLDSTEIN 2010).

⁵ One of them is She rab bzang po from sTod mNga' ris who laid foundations of three monasteries in the Nubra valley (lDum ra), two in Zanskar (*Zangs dkar*), converting a third one to the Gelugpa school and finally assigned to one of his own disciples the edification of dKyil Monastery in Spiti (VITALI 2000).



Fig. 09: The fortress-monastery of Brag mkhar. July 2010

In 1834, the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab invaded Spiti and Ladakh in order to extend the boundaries of Jammu. The Spiti valley then suffered the ravages of other incursions of the Sikh militia until the Dogra army was finally defeated by the Tibetans in 1841 (PETECH 1977). After 1846, the British ruled in the area and the lands of Spiti, Lahul and Ladakh were delivered into the hands of the government of India at last.

THE FORTRESS-MONASTERY OF BRAG MKHAR

Brag mkhar is located on the left bank of the Spiti River where the Pin River joins in, forming a large confluence which divides the whole valley into two areas of different morphology. ⁶ The fortress-monastery,⁷ the village and the “castle” of the No no are nested on a spur which marks the outer limit of a corrie wherein the village lately expanded. ⁸ As its name suggests, the site of Brag mkhar is above all a fortified palace (*mkhar*) which probably carried out the function of a district castle (*yul mkhar*). From its vertiginous cliff (*brag g.yang*) and strategic location which overlooks the main route it was hence possible to see a hostile army approaching from both downstream and upstream the Spiti River.

These types of feudal strongholds, where local lords often indulged in waging war against each other, are found all over Tibet and the Himalayan belt. Their edification in the political landscape is generally attributed to the disintegration of the Tibetan empire into smaller principalities which was followed by a period of unrest and civil war from the mid 9th century to the mid 13th century. The so-called capital of Spiti was never the centre of a powerful state or kingdom and the Tibetan term *rgyal sa*, which does not appear in our sources, should be better translated as royal site as we will see further on.

6 This may explain the distinction made between upper and lower Spiti which is often recorded under the designations of Pi cog, Pi ti pi cog, sPi ti spi cog, Ci cog or even Pi skyog and Pi kyog suggesting that the valley looks like a ladle (*skyogs*).

7 Lat. 32,090130° lon. 78,212331° elev. 3850m

8 The earliest households are clearly located on the spur above the fortress-monastery and below the uppermost „castle“ of the No no. The first household built within the corrie belongs to rGen dPal ldan's family and cannot be much older than the first half of the 20th century when Spiti started to enjoy a relatively quiet period. Oral communication with rGen dPal ldan. July 2010.



Fig. 08: The old village of Brag mkhar and the Spiti River. October 2008

BRAG MKHAR & THE KINDOM OF GUGE

From the late 10th century until 1630, West Tibet was ruled by a dynasty of pious kings (*lha bla ma*) who, in more than one occasions, renounced their secular prerogatives – at least partially – and decided to adopt a more ascetic way of life by taking religious vows. Their aspirations to sanctity, which was equally well illustrated by their missionary zeal and cultural patronage, could not always prevent dissident branches of the royal family from attempting to usurp the throne as a passage of the *Ngari Chronicles* indicates (VITALI 1996:125): ⁹

*Finally, having had a dispute with a subject, he [king rTse lde] was murdered. He died before his paternal uncle. // As a matter of fact, his four sons were as follows. His son was rTse 'od. His son was Jo rtse. His son rDo rje gdan. These three offspring resided at Sang brag Brang mkhar. lHa btsun dBang 'od was designated the heir apparent. He resided at dKar po'i Te lde. Finally, when there was a dispute between [uncle and nephew], dbon mnga' bdag bSod nams rtse assassinated him at Tho gling Thang gi 'od. //*¹⁰

This report will not discuss the succession struggle which broke out after king rTse lde's demise. It is sufficient to note that three of his sons were deprived of power and settled down in Brag mkhar ¹¹, while lHa btsun dBang 'od, the designated heir, was also ousted and could no longer reside at Tholing, the capital of the early dynasty of Guge. He was eventually assassinated by his paternal uncle bSod nams rtse which, as Vitali explains, resulted in a new politico-territorial arrangement (VITALI 1996).

9 The *Ngari Chronicles* (*mNga' ris rgyal rabs*) were compiled by Ngag bdang grags pa around 1497.

10 Mjug tu 'bangs mo la 'khus nas dkrong ste khu'i sngon la dgung gshegs so // de la sras bzhi ste / seng brag / brag mkhar la bzhugs / de'i sras rtse 'od / de'i sras jo rtse / de'i sras rdo rje gdan dang gdung gsum / lha btsun dbang 'od / gdung tshab la bzhag te / dkar po'i te lder bzhugs / mjug tu khu dbon 'khrugs pa'i dus su / dbon mnga' bdag bsod nams rtse / tho gling gi thang gi 'od du dkrong ngo //

11 It leaves little doubt that the text refers here to Brag mkhar in Spiti although the first toponym Sang brag , which Vitali corrects as Seng brag (the Leonine Rock), has not been located yet or is unknown to me (VITALI 1996:125 n.141).

The events related above must have taken place in the last quarter of the 11th century sometime between 1083 and 1092 (VITALI 1996). They offer the earliest literary attestation of Brag mkhar as a residence of Guge's royalty (*rgyal mkhar*). In the present state of preservation, the fortress-monastery bears no architectural, epigraphic or iconographical sign of dating back to this time.

A POSSIBLE ROYAL RENOVATOR

On the 31st July 1909, the Moravian missionary A. H. Francke (1870 – 1930), who later became Professor of Tibetan at Berlin University, reached Brag mkhar in Spiti and questioned the monks regarding the origin of their monastery. He later completed his report with a note from the “Reu-mig” which I believe is the *Re 'u mig* of the Mongolian historiographer Sum pa khan po (1704 – 1788). Since I did not manage to consult this text or any critical edition, and hence cannot confirm the reference, we shall rely on Francke's work (FRANCKE 1914:43) for the time being:¹²

The monastery of this town, the capital of Spiti, is called Lha-'od-pa[']i-dgon-pa. Lha-'od seems to be the local pronunciation of Zla-'od, the name of a famous lama who was born in 1121, according to the Reu-mig. Zla-'od-pa would then mean “a follower of Zla-'od”. He is apparently the founder or renovator of the monastery which now belongs to the Gelugpa order.

The following comments should then be taken with all due circumspection. Let us first consider the phonological remark about the name of that famous lama (*bla ma*) lHa 'od/ Zla 'od . The name of Zla 'od, attached to a renowned historical figure who had disciples in Spiti, has not come up yet in any other documents pertaining to West Tibet. There is, however, a *pandita* Zla 'od bzang po who, in 1006, along with Bhi na se na and Ka ma la rakshita, conferred the monastic ordination (*bsnyen par rdzogs pa*) to the notorious translator Rin chen bzang po (958 – 1055).¹³

His candidature is not very convincing since a gap of more than hundred years stands between the *pandita*'s religious activity in the area and the lama Zla 'od of the late *Re 'u mig* . Their identification would hence demand strong revision of the chronology assessed by Francke.

Moreover, we are provisionally inclined to believe that the religious establishment of Brag mkhar was correctly referred to, at least orally, as *lHa 'od pa'i dgon pa* , the monastery of lHa 'od or perhaps of lHa 'od's followers. This suggests that we could be dealing here with a member of the royal dynasty (*lHa bla ma*) of Guge who, like many of his predecessors, decided to gain spiritual merits and political credence by restoring a religious edifice.¹⁴

¹² The latest critical edition of this text seems to be B.P. Singh (ed. and tr.), *The Chronology of Tibet according to the Re 'u mig* of Sum-pa-Khan-po, Bihar Research Society, Patna, 1991

¹³ About the ordination of Rin chen bzang po and the pertaining sources, see Some details regarding Rin chen bzang po (VITALI 1996:240).

¹⁴ We assume that Sum pa khan po uses the term *bzheng pa*, a verb that means to build or erect, to lay foundation, to renovate or to enlarge, which could explain Francke's attempt of disambiguation.

It is of course tempting to hazard a guess at the identity of this mysterious royal patron. The name of rTse 'od can be conjecturally put forward. As we have seen, he found refuge at Brag mkhar with two of his brothers following the murder of his father king rTse lde. Yet, the year 1121 would be untenable for rTse 'od's birth although it might be acceptable for the time of the monastery renovation.



Fig. 10: The four mchod rten and the skylight on the roof of the 'du khang. July 2010

If the identity and biography of lHa 'od/ Zla 'od cannot be ascertained at the moment, the documenting campaign carried out by the team of Graz University of Technology in summer 2010 may shed some light on the subject. The observations made *in situ* and the plans realised afterwards indicate that the main edifice of the fortress-monastery of Brag mkhar was subject to a major enlargement. The earliest room was probably the assembly hall ('du khang), of what is now the monastery, with its rather large walls and almost square shape which suggests a towering castle origin. The roof of the assembly hall, which has become the floor of a large empty space of no specific purpose, has a skylight (*nam khung*) which once allowed light to filter through, and accommodates a series of four stupas (*mchod rten*) on its outermost east side.

These stupas are of particular interest to us because they were built in all likelihood after the completion of the 'du khang and before the subsequent enlargement of the edifice, in both width and height, for the upper part of the largest stupa is clearly embedded in the beams of the ceiling while its wooden axis (*srog shing*) visibly reappears in the upper floor. It is difficult to specify the date and the function of these stupas, which were possibly replastered on many occasions, and to establish whether they were votive monuments or reliquaries; at least one of them has already been opened leaving nothing to contemplate other than its axis. It cannot be ruled out that the largest stupa still contains the remains and relics of an important religious figure who was long forgotten by the collective memory of the place but who might have assumed a significant role in the history of Brag mkhar.

However, it seems premature to discuss construction phases (Bauphasen) in this report. The assembly hall should nonetheless be given priority due to its centrality in the development of the edifice. Besides the renovation of its endangered wall paintings, carbon dating and dendrochronology analyses of the wooden beams and pillars could provide useful information.

A 15TH CENTURY HISTORICAL WALL PAINTING

In the 15th century, gSang phu ba lHa dbang blo gros, a native of mNga 'ris skor gsum who was a disciple of Tsong kha pa (1357 – 1419), mKhas grub rje (1385 – 1437)¹⁵ and dGe 'dun grub (1391– 1474)¹⁶, returned to West Tibet participating actively in the diffusion of Gelugpa tenets. gSang phu ba lHa dbang blo gros' intensive activity, which included the foundations of many temples as we shall see, is not only attested in literary sources but is also epigraphically and iconographically glorified on the wall of the *dKyil 'khor lha khang* at Tabo Monastery. A portrait of lHa dbang blo gros is depicted on the right wall and bears the inscription “The one whose name is lord lHa dbang became [...] the ornament of the crown, the king of all migrators” (*'gro ba rnams kyi rgyal po gtsug gi rgyan du gyur [...] rje lHa dbang tshan (sic) can la*). The “ornament of the crown” is a frequent expression used to designate the monastic complex of Tabo, for which lHa dbang is credited with the construction of various temples (VITALI 1999). These temples were also represented immediately below his portrait.

The scene depicted shows the monastic complex of Tabo at the time of the completion of the *dKyil 'khor lha khang* and is accompanied with an inscription, “the ground plan of the temple, the ornament of Tabo (*Ta po rgyan gyi gtsug lag khang gi bkod pa*). Vitali claims that this type of panoramic view of the buildings, with its somewhat awkward perspective, is a common practice of West Tibet in the 15th century (VITALI 1996, 1999). In the sacred courtyard (*chos 'khor*), a group of historical personages are gathered around the central figure of Tsong kha pa, in what appears to be a religious teaching, and can be identified thanks to individual inscriptions.¹⁷

Thus, flanked to the right of Blo bzang grags pa is a listening pupil (*chos nyan pa*)¹⁸ and to his left the great arhat Chos 'phags (*gnas brtan chen po Chos 'phags*). Below these three figures is seated a lay congregation of high dignitaries. A royal couple comes first with king bSod nams 'bum (*rgyal po bSod nams 'bum*) and his wife jo co lHas lham 'joms, followed by a minister called Rin rgyan (*blon po Rin rgyan*). Finally, in the lower register of this depiction stands a singular character who is identified as the clerical officer and minister from Brag mkhar (*blon po Grang dkar dpon btsun*). Commenting this last personage, Vitali asserts that his title indicates that he was “a junior religious minister of royal descent” and gratifies the whole congregation as “the court of Spiti of those years” (VITALI 1996:525 n.896).

This painting obviously raises many more questions about the royal genealogy of the Spiti valley in the 15th century than it provides historical grounds for further development. However, Brag mkhar appears to be once again a place of conjoined political and religious significance (*chos srid gnyis ldan*) in the area and gains increasing visibility in our investigation.

15 mKhas grub rje dGe legs dpal bzang was posthumously recognised as the 1st Panchen Rinpoche by the 5th Dalai lama who established the institution in the 17th century. Also see next note

16 dGe 'dun grub was posthumously recognised as the first Dalai Lama. In 1447, he founded the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo (*bKra shis lhun po*) in Central Tibet (*Tsang*) which became a „focal point of reference“ for the Gelugpa monasteries of the western Himalayas (VITALI 2000). Other Gelugpa exponents and religious masters from Tashi Lunpo, such as Shantipa blo gros rgyal mtshan (1487-1567) and the incarnate lineages of lo chen Rin chen bzang po and the Pan chen bla ma, were instrumental in sealing the bound between the two regions.

17 These inscriptions were recorded differently by Tucci (TUCCI 1988:113) and we did not succeed in reading all of them successfully when we last visited the place in summer 2010. We rely here on Vitali's rendering (VITALI 1996:525 n.896).

18 The term *chos nyan pa* (*dharma-sravanika*) [diacritic signs missing] literally designates an individual worthy to listen to Buddhist exposure. It cannot be ruled out that it refers here to the proper name of the personage illustrated

THE 40TH HOLDER OF THE GANDEN THRONE

Our next reference is provided by an entry of the *Great White Conch Encyclopaedia* (*Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen po*) compiled by Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las (1927 – 1997) one of the most important Tibetan historians of the 20th century.¹⁹

The author has recorded the succession of most dGa' ldan khri pa of the Gelugpa establishment and hence offers interesting information regarding our subject.

In 1654, dPal ldan rgyal mtsho (c.1601 – 1674) from Brag mkhar in Spiti became the 40th holder of the Ganden throne, a position he held during seven years. Prior to his appointment to the most prestigious and powerful rank of the Gelugpa hierarchy, he completed his studies first at mNga' ris grwa tshang²⁰ and then at the Tantric college of lower Tibet (*rGyud smad grwa tshang*) near Lhasa.²¹

Unfortunately, the author of the *Great White Conch Encyclopaedia* does not indicate his primary source for this entry but it seems reasonable to assume that he consulted the *Baidurya ser po* of sDe srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho which was not available to us for confirmation. It is difficult to ascertain whether dPal ldan rgyal mtsho was just a native of Brag mkhar village or a novice monk from the monastery when he left the secluded valley of Spiti for further Buddhist studies in Central Tibet (*dbus*), and may not even be relevant. In any case, the inhabitants of Brag mkhar reappear continuously *en filigrane* of the great religious and political history of the Himalayan kingdoms.²²



Fig. 11: Tsong kha pa (1357 – 1419) . Wall painting, Upper temple, Brag mkhar, July 2010

19 We wish to thank dGe shes chab ril from Brag mkhar for drawing our attention to this reference.

20 The imposing monastery of mNga' ris grwa tshang in the Yon valley was built by the 2nd Dalai Lama under the patronage of a king of Guge in 1541.

21 *stod mnga 'ris spi ti grang mkhar du bltams / dbus phyogs mnga' ris grwa tshang dang rgyud smad du mkhas par sbyangs / rab byung bcu gcig pa'i shing rta* (1654) la gser khrir 'khod nas lo bdun ring chos 'khor bskor / zur bzhugs mdzad nas mthar dgung lo don gsum bzhes zhes byung //

22 Little is known about the local villagers and peasants of Brag mkhar. Following Lyall's observations, Francke records however the name of six paternal relative clans (*pha spun*) : 1) rGya zhing pa 2) Khyung po 3) bLon chen pa 4) sNyegs pa 5) Henir 6) Nandu The last two are clearly of non-Tibetan origin (FRANCKE 1914:48).

THE CASTELLAN & THE CHAMBERLAIN

The next sources, somewhat evanescent and distant in time from about hundred years, offer a glimpse at two local personalities of the feudal stronghold of Spiti. The first occurrence is found in the colophon of a text commissioned by the king of Ladakh Seng ge rnam rgyal around 1630 when his aggressive campaigns in West Tibet resulted in the disintegration of the kingdom of Guge. Nam mka' dpal mgon, an aristocratic member of the king's retinue, is entrusted by the latter with task of copying several Buddhist scriptures and hagiographies. In the Sa bu colophon of the Astasharasrikaprajnaparamita [diacritic signs missing], a Gag ga bsTan 'dzin rnam rgyal, castellan (*mkhar dpon*) of Brag mkhar in Spiti is mentioned.²³ In his unsurpassed work on the history of Ladakh, Petech wonders whether bsTan 'dzin rnam rgyal could be the king Seng ge rnam rgyal's half brother but concludes that a "royal prince would be expected to be called *rgyal sras*" and not *ga ga* (PETECH 1977:55 n.3).

The Ladakhi control over the region lasted from 1630 until 1680 when the government of Tibet (*dGa' ldan pho brang*) brought the rNam rgyal paramountcy to an end. The Spiti valley was thus torn between ascending powers and struggles of influence from different religious orders. In 1647, the kingdom of mNga' ris skor gsum was divided between the three sons of the late Seng ge rnam rgyal who passed away in 1642. Although bDe mchog rnam rgyal officially obtained Zanskar and Spiti, the monasteries of the latter seem to have remained under the jurisdiction of the central Tibetan government as we will see further on.²⁴ It is probably during those years that a castle, which according to Francke was used as a garrison post by the Ladakhi people, before it eventually became the seat of the *No no*, was built on top of the spur overlooking the village and the fortress-monastery of Brag mkhar (FRANCKE 1914: 44). Consequently, the identity and political allegiance of our castellan Gag ga bsTan 'dzin rnam rgyal would certainly be of great interest to us in order to determine the topographical configuration of Brag-mkhar by the time of the Tibet-Ladakh treaty.

A century later, sometime around 1750, the western Himalayas were agitated by a conflict opposing Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, the king of Upper Ladakh, and king bKra shis rnam rgyal of Lower Ladakh. The rivalry between the uncle and the nephew over the supremacy in Spiti and the limited control of trade in the area was endangering the commercial interests of Central Tibet, too. Therefore, the 7th Dalai Lama (1708 – 1757) appointed a mediator in the person of Ka' thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu (1698 – 1755) who was deputed to Ladakh in order to hold negotiation and resolve the argument. The meeting between the different parties took place in sGar tog where two government officials of Ngari (*sgar dpon*) went as chamberlains. Although their names were not preserved, the two representatives of western Tibet were said to be from Zanskar and Brag mkhar. The negotiations eventually succeeded and an agreement (*La dwags kyi 'ching yig*) was ratified in 1752.

²³ His name is said to be recorded again in a Spiti inscription (FRANCKE 1906: F.173). This document was not at our disposal.

²⁴ Spiti still had to pay annual revenue in iron bars to Ladakh up to 1842 (PETECH 1977)



Fig. 12: The so-called Castle of the No no, July 2010

The potential disturbances that could result on the western Tibetan frontier due to the impediment of the commercial traffic between North West India, Central Asia and Tibet underline the critical role that feudal territories like Spiti, Zanskar and Lahul, which marked the westernmost limit of Tibet political influence, once had. It is therefore not surprising that despite its relative isolation the feudatory land of Spiti would be consulted and officially represented in times of trouble.

SOCIAL PRACTICE & ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

In his study of the socio-economic organisation between the major monasteries and the lay population in Spiti, Jahoda provides helpful pieces of information to understand some of the structures found in Brag mkhar (JAHODA 2007). Since the mid 17th century, the main Gelugpa monasteries of dKyil, Brag mkhar and Tabo, with their estates, were subject to Lhasa and recorded as *chos gzhis*, a term quite similar to *bla brang* which designates a household corporation of monks. These monastic communities were important landowners ensuring regular and substantial income. Certain fields were the full property of the monastery and were cultivated by tenants while others belonged to individual monks (*grwa zhing*). Besides, a due in kind (*bon*) was levied from taxable landholding peasants (*khral pa*) in order to support monastic communities as part of a special economic system (*chos gzhis*) which is the main subject of Jahoda's paper. Like him, we are inclined to believe that the *bon* "designates a special category of religious dues in kind" such as grains (*sa bon* , *'bru*) like barley (*nas*). This customary law of levying grains was still witnessed by Coldstream, a British officer stationed in Spiti in 1912. His account of an event located in Brag mkhar is reproduced here as given by Jahoda; all additions are his (JAHODA 2007: 229):

All possible precautions were taken to verify the payments of pun [bon] [...] After some difficulty the monastery records were procured and examined. These were always in a very confused state, being only a mass of tattered manuscripts packed without any order into leather boxes. [...]

At Dangkhar a darbar was held at which the abbots of all monasteries, the Nono [i.e. the head of the leading local aristocratic family] and his servants, the patwari and the great majority of the landowners were present. [...] Asked why the truth had been concealed so long, the assembly gave the explanation [...] that they feared confiscation of religious dues by Government. "But now that the measuring chain has come to Spiti, nothing can possibly be hidden, and each khang-chhen [khang chen] has been ordered to say what is true." This declaration was corroborated by a high dignitary of the Lhasa faith [i.e. the Dge lugs pa school, most probably the contemporary incarnation of lo chen Rin chen bzang po] who was living in the monastery of Ki. The people admitted that whatever cash revenue was imposed they would be bound by their religion to continue paying pun at the existing rates to the monasteries.

In summer 2010, three small dissimulated chambers were documented inside the monastery of Brag mkhar. Two of them had been unmistakably used as granaries as the remains of grain and dead maggots indicated. rGen dPal ldan, who was the in charge of the place (*sku gnyer*) at that time, pointed out a third granary which he himself reopened to let us take measurements. These somewhat hidden storage locations are of no surprise when reading Coldstream's report. The latter also explains that "the pun collections are spent principally on religious feasts and concerts in which the lay population joins". On inspection, the structures partially dug into the ground and embedded in the walls of the monastery were ideal granaries to stock large quantity of grains and protect them from rodents and germination until the time of celebration.

By and large, the commotion that followed the double taxation imposed by the British upon the households of Spiti around 1840 and the court that was eventually hold in the presence of the settlement officer, the landowners, the abbots, the No no and the high dignitary of dKyil monastery, is a remarkable testimony to the multifunctional identity of Brag mkhar. The perennial issue between religious and state edifice finds here a social resonance which underlines the symbolic function of the place as the socio-economic, religious and political centre of the Spiti valley.



Fig. 13: The granary unearthed by rGen dPal ldan. July 2010

A SECRET DOOR & A MYSTERIOUS SPIRITUAL FRIEND

Finally, it must be recalled that when Francke was visiting the assembly hall (*'du khang*) of Brag mkhar in 1909, the monks pointed out an inscription that he could not read because of the dark but that contained, he was told, the term "spiritual friend" (*dge ba'i bshes gnyen*) He also adds that the inscription was located "above one of the doors", a statement that makes eyebrows to rise since the main doorway provides the only access to the assembly hall today (FRANCKE 1914:44). But in July 2010, while documenting the place, some senior monks confirmed that their elders decided, many years ago and for some reasons that were no longer remembered, to wall the lateral door on the right side of the hall, obliterating the inscription forever.

WHERE THE MISSING INSCRIPTION OF THE SPIRITUAL FRIEND BEARS WISDOM

It has been recently argued, with much passion and intellectual brilliance, that the aim of any archaeological enterprise is the recollection of memory rather than the investigation of the past (OLIVIER 2010). From the top of its steep cliff, the fortress-monastery of Brag mkhar has not come to term with the structural deficiencies of history, while its most intimate structures (e.g walls, paintings, artefacts etc.) are the sole remaining evidences of a memory lost. Thus, repairing the walls, renovating the paintings, dating the structures should bring us much happiness, if not more, than waiting for new historical source and textual testimony about the place. In other words, to recognize the significant contribution of Brag mkhar in the Spiti valley is to ensure its continuity into the present time. Black and white photographs taken almost a century ago attest it: the living memory of Brag mkhar is falling apart.

For the identity of the spiritual friend does not matter as much as the recalling of his kindness. This is the wisdom of the place.

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