

The Bsam-yas *rdo-rings*

[Plate 4]

The inscription is on a pillar of hard reddish stone standing on a worn lotus-shaped base of some softer light-coloured stone against the east wall of the great temple of Bsam-yas a little to the south of the main entrance. It is remarkably well preserved and the lettering, which is rather coarser than that of the Zhol *rdo-rings*, is undamaged. The text was copied for Sir Charles Bell in 1921 and was photographed for him on a later visit in 1935. I published it from his copy, as he had wished, in *JRASB* 1949. It was subsequently photographed and copied by me in 1949, and in the same year by Professor G. Tucci who published it in *The Tombs of the Tibetan Kings* (TTK) Rome, 1950.

Neither of those editions shows the original punctuation though it can be seen in that part of the inscription illustrated on plate 3 of TTK. Like that of the Zhol *rdo-rings* it uses a single and a double *tsheg* though not, as in Zhol, at the beginning of each line. A single *shad* is used to separate phrases and also in a rather random fashion in the middle of sentences. A double *shad* appears only in the *dang-kyog* at the beginning of the inscription.

Neither my edition nor Tucci's mentions that at the top of the pillar below a decorative scroll and not quite parallel with the main text is the mantra *OM A HUM* well carved in the Warty character. The letters are smaller and more lightly incised than those of the main inscription and it appears to be a later addition.

The inscription, which is the earliest document relating to Buddhism in Tibet, records that the *btsan-po* made a vow to maintain the religion of the Buddha established in the temples of Ra-sa and Bsam-yas etcetera, and it states that a detailed text exists separately.

By great good fortune that detailed text has survived. In f. 111b of vol. *ja* of the Chos-byung of Dpa'-bo Gtsug-lag phreng-ba the inscription on the Bsam-yas *rdo-rings*, attributed to Khri Srong-lde-brtsan, is reproduced accurately apart from a few orthographical discrepancies. It is stated by PT to be a summary of two preceding documents which he describes as *bka' gtsigs*. Internal evidence, and a similar *bka' gtsigs* relating to a similar vow by Khri Lde-srong-brtsan (pp. 43, 72) confirm the authenticity of those documents. The first (PT *ja* ff. 108b-110a) is the detailed text of the edict, explaining why it was necessary and ending with the names of the ministers who witnessed it and were bound by it. There is also a list of the temples and religious communities to which sealed copies of the edict and of a secondary document, composed at the same time, were sent. In addition to the 'Phrul-s nang of Ra-sa and Bsam-yas Lhun-gyis-grub, each of which received two copies, they are: Bkra-shis lha-yul of Khra-'brug, the religious community of the palace, the Rgya-btags Ra-mo-che of Ra-sa, Khams-sum mi-ldog sgrol in Brag-dmar, the religious communities of Bru-zha, Zhang-zhung and Mdo-smad, and those in the jurisdiction of the Sde-blon.

Khra-'brug, traditionally attributed to Srong-brtsan sgam-po, is in the Yar-lung valley. If "the palace" refers to a specific place it may be Pho-brang, also in the Yar-lung valley, associated with Khri Lde-gtsug-brtsan. The Ra-mo-che of Ra-sa can most probably be identified with the great *gtsug-lag-khang* founded, according to the *Li-yul chos-kyi lo-rgyus* (Emmerick, p. 85 (58) by the Chinese bride of Khri Lde-gtsug-brtsan some twelve years before her death in 739 A.D., that is to say about

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727. Khams-sum Mi-ldog-sgrol is the three-storeyed temple, like a smaller version of the main temple, a little to the west outside the enclosing wall of the main temple complex at Bsam-yas. It is attributed in the *Rgyal-po bka'-thang* f. 34b and in the *Padma Bka'-thang* f. 182b under the name Khams-gsum Me-tog-sgrol, to Khri Srong-lde-brtsan's queen Tshe-spong-za Rma-rgyal ldong-skar, who is known in the *Bka'-thang* and *Sba-bzhad* as Me-tog-sgron. Bru-zha, the Gilgit area, had been raided by the Tibetans as early as 719 A.D. and was dominated by them from 737 until the early part of the 9th century. Buddhism had been established there long before the Tibetan connection. Zhang-zhung was an imprecisely defined stretch of country to the north and west of Tibet inhabited by a complex of related tribes. The Tibetans conquered it between 634 and 660 A.D. Its capital seems to have been near Lake Manasarowar. Mdo-smad, mentioned as early as 653 A.D., was an eastern frontier province probably including what are now A-mdo and Sde-dge. The Bde-blon—for which "Sde-blon" in PT must be intended—headed the administration of five districts known as the *mtshong-khyab khri-sde-nga* which were set up at the time of the conquest of the Chinese borderlands between 758 and 763 A.D. In those regions many Buddhist temples had existed long before the arrival of the Tibetans who later founded their own temples and monasteries. Khri Srong-lde-brtsan is credited in the Skar-cung inscription (pp. 74, 75) and in DTH p. 114 with building temples "at the centre and on the borders, *dbung mthar*"; and some of those on the border, in the Tun-huang region, are named in TLTD II pp. 88-91.

The inscription and the detailed *bka'-gtsigs* together thus show the existence of a considerable number of Buddhist institutions of some sort throughout Tibet and its dependencies in the middle of the reign of Khri Srong-lde-brtsan. Further information about Buddhism at that time is added in the second document mentioned in the first edict as an account of the spreading of the doctrine in both early and recent times. Although in PT this is called the second *bka'-gtsigs*, the document identifies itself as a *bka'-mchid* i.e. not a sworn edict but a statement or exposition. Its purpose is to tell the history of the coming of religion—*chos 'byung-ba'i lo-drung*—and it can be seen as the first essay in that genre. The founding of the *pe-har*—vihara—of Ra-sa in the time of Srong-brtsan sgam-po is described as the beginning of the doctrine in Tibet; the building of a temple at Kwa-cu in Brag-mar is attributed to Khri Srong-lde-brtsan's father Khri Lde-gtsug-brtsan; there is confirmation of the tradition that there was a reaction against the practice of Buddhism on the death of Khri Lde-gtsug-brtsan; and there is a summary of what was seen as the essence of Buddhism at that time, inculcating the gradual acquisition of enlightenment through the active accumulation of merit.

It is largely due to the brief inscription at Bsam-yas that we can accept as authentic the valuable light thrown on the history of Buddhism in Tibet by these two documents in PT. The first of them, moreover, makes it possible to date the inscription to within a few years. The principal witness to the detailed edict was the Chief Minister Zhang Rgyal-zigs shu-theng who, according to the T'ang Annals, demitted office in 782 A.D. Accepting that the great temple at Bsam-yas was completed in the sheep year 779 A.D. the inscription and the other documents can be placed between those two years and therefore earlier than the culmination of rivalry between the Indian teaching of gradual and the Chinese of immediate enlightenment in a great debate, probably in 792 A.D. (Demiéville, *Le Concile de Lhasa*, and Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts II*).

REIGN OF KHRI SRONG-LDE-BRTSAN 755-c. 794 A.D.

Inscription

- 1 ཅ།ར་ས་དང་།བྲག་མར་གྱི་
- 2 གཙུག་ལག་ཁང་ལས་སྡོགས་
- 3 བར་།དགོལ་མཚོག་།གསུམ་
- 4 གྱི་རྩེལ་བཙུགས་པ་དང་།སངས་
- 5 རྒྱས་གྱི་ཚོས་།མཛད་པ་འདི་།
- 6 བམ་དུ་ཡང་གྱི་གཏང་མའ་ཞིག་
- 7 བར་བཟྱི་འོ་།ཡོལ་ལྷན་གྱུར་།
- 8 པའ་ཡང་།དེ་ལས་སྡོགས་སྡོགས་
- 9 བསྐྱེད་བར་བཟྱི་འོ་།དའ་སྡོགས་
- 10 ཅད་།གཏང་རབས་རེ་རེ་ཞིང་ཡང་
- 11 བཙུག་པོ་ཡབ་སྲས་གྱིས་འདི་།
- 12 བཞིན་ཡི་དམ་བཙུག་།དེ་ལས་
- 13 མཐའ་ཁ་དབྱེད་པ་དག་གྱུང་།
- 14 གྱི་བཟྱི་སྡོགས་བསྐྱེད་བར་།འཛིག་

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Translation

May the shrines¹ of the Three Jewels established in the temples of Ra-sa and Brag-mar and this practice of the religion of the Buddha never be abandoned or destroyed. The requisite properties that have been provided shall not be diminished or reduced. From now onwards each generation of the *btsan-po*, fathers and sons, shall make a vow in this way. And in order that there shall be no detraction from that oath and that it shall not be changed, the supra-

Notes to Translation

1. *rten* implying a support, container, image etc is difficult to translate satisfactorily.

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Translation

mundane gods, the gods of the world, and the spirits² are all invoked as witnesses. The *btsan-po*, father and son, ruler and ministers³ all have so sworn. A detailed account of the edict exists separately.

Notes to Translation (continued)

2. In the detailed edict in PT 109a the invocation has a more Buddhist appearance, beginning with the Buddhas of the ten directions, all the holy doctrine, the assembly of Bodhisattvas, the Pratyeka Buddhas and disciples; and ending with an array of autochthonous deities, gods of Tibet, Klu, Gnod-sbyin and Mi-ma-yin.

3. *rje-blon*. Thomas, TLTD II translates “eminent counsellor”. Dagyab’s dictionary gives “king and ministers” and see the Rkong-po inscription where the two words are separated by a *shad* (see p. 70).