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LHASA IN THE  
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

*The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*

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## CHAPTER TWO

### LHASA, LEGEND AND HISTORY

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The history of the founding of Lhasa, the “Land of the Gods”, like that of many highly symbolic sites, is glorified in legend. Moreover, Western authors who were able to stay in the Holy City for short periods in the 17th century, then in a more lasting way since the beginning of the 20th, have described it as the capital of Tibet since the 7th century, accepting—and passing on, without real critical examination—Tibetan tradition. Even Tibetologists, until the present day, have not been interested in the history of the city itself and, in spite of their knowledge of old documents, have implicitly tacked onto the site the Western concept of capital city, writing that in the 7th century, Lhasa became the centre of political power. Yet, comparison of old documents, both Tibetan and Chinese, and the scanty information provided by the Tibetan historical and biographical literature allow us, not to recount the true history of the city, but to at least reach a more accurate idea of its origin in the 7th century, the nature of its prestige, and the vicissitudes it experienced up to the 17th century, when the Fifth Dalai Lama, having just been handed political power over Tibet, decided to make it the seat of his government.

#### *To Begin With: The Jokhang*

The founding of Lhasa is attributed to the work of the first great historical Tibetan king—some say “emperor”—Songtsen Gampo (died 650). For Tibetans, he is the thirty-third heir to the throne in a divine lineage: the first king was a god that had descended to a mountain in southern Tibet to become the sovereign of the “black head” men, the Tibetans. In fact, the “kingdom” of these sovereigns was confined to one part of the Yarlung Valley, a southern tributary

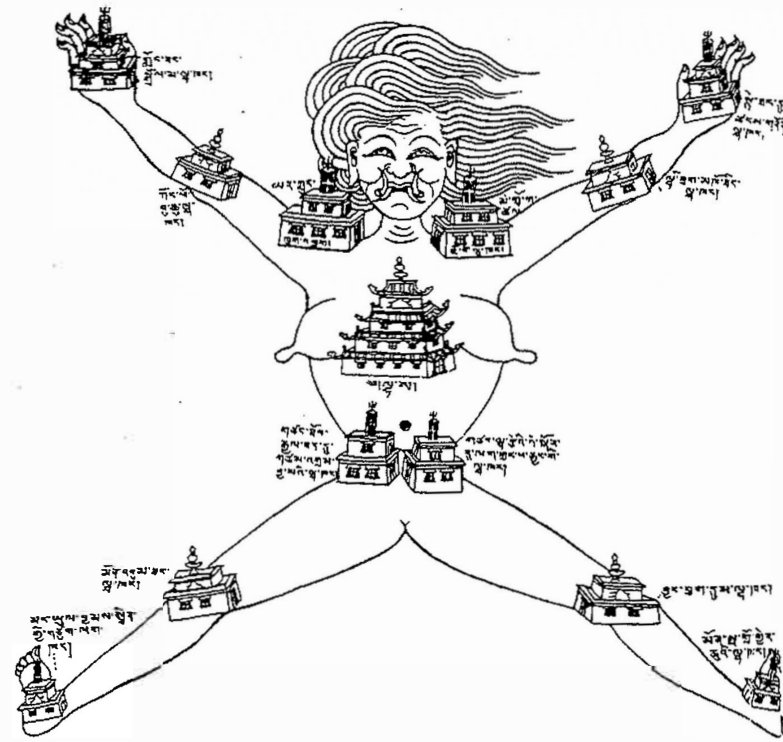
of the Tsangpo,<sup>1</sup> and was exposed to manoeuvres and attacks from surrounding principalities. It was Songtsen Gampo's father, Namri Songtsen, who, at the beginning of the 7th century, through his alliances and conquests, started the work completed by his son: the unification of Tibet. In particular, just before his violent death—he was poisoned—he succeeded in annexing the Phenyul, a region whose boundaries at the time are not well known but which included or adjoined the present site of Lhasa. Consolidating the acquisitions of his father through the same policy of alliances and conquests, Songtsen Gampo soon established his empire within borders that more or less remained those of Tibet until the 18th century. Tibetan troops, in their conquering surge, subdued the Tuyuhun, a Turco-Mongol kingdom of the Kokonor region, and struck fear into the young Chinese Tang dynasty (founded in 618). The Tibetan king, like other “Barbarians”, asked for an imperial princess in marriage and, indeed, obtained one.

The Tibetans, converted to Buddhism en masse between the 9th and 11th centuries, turned this war epic into a pious legend which erases the conquests and political work of Songtsen Gampo, in favour of a vast reconstruction of the whole dynastic period (7th–9th centuries A.D.). Henceforth, Tibetan historians describe in the events and heroic deeds associated with their ancient kings, the implementation of a divine plan, a veritable “programming” of the conversion of Tibet. Songtsen Gampo, recognized as an emanation of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara,<sup>2</sup> became the first King according to Buddhist Law (*chögyel*, Skr. *dharmaraja*). Attributed to him are the decision to create a Tibetan script to make possible the translation of Sanskrit canonical texts, the promulgation of the first code of laws—modelled on the rules of Buddhist ethics—and the will to convert his subjects. So it is that the latter would have referred to him, no longer by the name under which he reigned—Trisongtsen—but by the epithet “The Wise”, Songtsen *Gampo*, under which he went down to posterity. In this perspective, and for the history of Lhasa, the story of his marriages to foreign princesses takes on all its importance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Brahmaputra, in its lower course in India.

<sup>2</sup> This *bodhisattva* is Tibet's protector, to whom the Buddha passing into nirvana would have entrusted the responsibility of converting the Land of Snows.

<sup>3</sup> It is also necessary to mention the tradition quoted by some sources, according to which the Tibetan script and the first grammatical treatises were developed in the fortified enclosure, the royal residence, of Maru, or Marru, in Lhasa, where



The demoness who encompassed Tibet. On her heart was built the Jokhang temple of Lhasa. Drawing by Tenzin, 1970. By kind permission of I. Martin du Gard.

### The Legend

King Songtsen Gampo, aware of his sacred mission, knew that he would need, as helpers in his work of conversion, protective statues

the king would have studied and completely mastered them. Some Western authors have suggested the identification of this place with a temple built later in Lhasa, Meru Lhakhang (*lhakhang* meaning “temple”). But, in addition to the terminology clearly referring to a civil, not a religious, building, it is tempting to connect this reference to another, set out by other Tibetan historians, asserting that Songtsen Gampo, at the beginning of his reign, built a “palace” (*phodrang*) on Marpori (“Red Mountain”), the steep hill where the Potala was built. This tradition is perhaps the echo of a genuine fact; however, it is not certain that the term *phodrang* should be taken in its later sense of a large seigniorial building (rather than palace), and not in an old sense referring only to a place of residence of a holder of the lineage.

that were particularly holy. He began by miraculously obtaining a statue of Avalokiteshvara in his eleven-headed form, which, after having many wonders attributed to it, to this day remains one of the effigies most venerated by Tibetans. Then he asked for, in marriage, in turn, two Buddhist princesses, whom he knew to be emanations of two forms of the female Buddha of compassion, Tara, the Saviour: the Nepalese king's daughter, Bhrikuti, famous among Tibetans by the name *Belza* (the Nepalese Wife), and the Chinese emperor's daughter, Wencheng, known as *Gyaza* (the Chinese Wife). In the dowry that each sovereign then gave his daughter, was a statue whose origin went back to the Buddha himself: the Nepalese princess brought that of the Buddha at the age of eight years, known by the name of Mikyö Dorje, while the Chinese princess was given the effigy representing the Buddha at the age of twelve, from then on venerated under the name of Jowo, the Lord. Both were received by the King in Lhasa and, soon, each princess wanted to build a temple to accommodate the statue that she had brought. The Chinese Wife built hers at the place where the chariot carrying the Jowo had stopped, unable to go further: this was the Ramoche ("Great Enclosure"), whose entrance opens towards the East, in the direction of China, to evoke, it is said, the memory of this princess' native country. As for the Nepalese Wife, she did not have the knowledge of astrology and geomancy necessary to choose the appropriate site. In spite of her reluctance,<sup>4</sup> she was obliged to ask the Chinese Wife to make the astrological calculations. The answer was that she had to build her temple on the Milk Plain Lake, Othang. Thinking that this advice was probably inspired by jealousy, the Nepalese Wife went to the king.

Through foreknowledge, the king knew what the divinatory calculations had revealed to his Chinese wife: the land of Tibet was like the body of a demoness lying on her back; her heart was situated at the location of the Milk Plain Lake whose water represented blood. Now, the conversion of Tibet could not take place unless this

Be that as it may, Marpori does not play a part in the founding legend of Lhasa, implying that the two places were clearly distinguished. Moreover, they were situated more than a kilometre from each other and, even at the beginning of the 20th century, the British of the Younghusband expedition (1904), recounting their entry into Lhasa, described successively their passage in front of the Potala, then, about a mile further, crossing the city gate.

<sup>4</sup> To enliven the story, sources made use of a rivalry between the two wives.

creature was immobilized. To do this, Songtsen Gampo undertook the construction of twelve temples, which, like nails, had to fix the joints, forming the image of three concentric squares: shoulders and hips, elbows and knees, wrists and ankles.<sup>5</sup> This left the heart, the vital centre for Tibetans. The king reassured his Nepalese wife, confirmed that the temple must indeed be erected at this location, and the work of filling in the lake began. Goats were used to carry the earth and stones, which would explain the initial name of the temple and Lhasa's first known toponym: Rasa, "Land (or Place) of the Goats".<sup>6</sup> Each princess had skilled craftsmen come from her native country to build and decorate her temple and the Jowo was installed in the Ramoche while the Mikyö Dorje was placed in the Rasa temple. When the king visited the latter, he found it so beautiful that he exclaimed: "It is a miraculous apparition (Trül nang)!" whence comes the name given to the building, Miraculous Apparition Temple of Rasa (Rasa Trül nang Tsulagkhang).

Converted in their turn, it is said that the three Tibetan wives of Songtsen Gampo also had temples built in the more-or-less immediate neighbourhood, one building hers much further away, at Yerpa in the present-day Phenpo. The latter was the site of places, laid out in tiers, where the principal actors in the conversion of Tibet, beginning with Songtsen Gampo, meditated and made retreats.

For the common people, the King and his wives died like every human. Those of great spirituality saw them absorbed into the statue of the eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara. Just before her disappearance, the Chinese Wife warned the Royal Councillors that they must move the Jowo from the Ramoche to the Miraculous Apparition Temple and hide it behind a partition upon which they would paint the image of the *bodhisattva* Manjushri. And so this became the final home of the Jowo, the Jokhang—the "House of the Lord".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Located on a map, the names of these temples—the list of which is, moreover, unstable—do not come close to forming the ideal figure suggested and it is necessary to take this outline for what it is: the symbol of the expansion of the empire and that of the subservience of the native beliefs to the new Buddhist order.

<sup>6</sup> Even today, sheep and goats serve as pack animals. A goat can be seen sculpted on the wall of a chapel in the Jokhang, as a mark, it is said, of gratitude for these animals.

<sup>7</sup> Another tradition, which appears to be more rational, says that the transfer took place during the minority of Songtsen Gampo's son, when a Chinese army was approaching Lhasa and there was a rumour that it was coming to recover the statue and take it back to China.

*Historical Elements*

This beautiful story, probably constructed down through the centuries, only appeared in its elaborated version in the middle of the 11th century at the earliest, and more probably a century later, in some "treasure texts", a genre still much debated today.<sup>8</sup> To try to work out an elusive historical reality, it is necessary to turn to contemporary documents of, if not Lhasa's founding, at least the royal era. Unfortunately, there are few of these in Tibetan (sketchy manuscripts and edicts written on stone-pillars), while Chinese sources sometimes present interpolations or chronological confusion.

Songtsen Gampo was born not far from the Lhasa plain, in Gyama, a small valley formed by a left tributary of the Kyichu (the Lhasa River), about fifty kilometres upstream.<sup>9</sup> The marriage of the king to a Nepalese princess has been put in doubt because it is not mentioned in any old documents, Tibetan or Nepalese. It is plausible, however, since the king of Nepal—a name that referred, at the time, only to the Kathmandu Valley—paid tribute to the Tibetan king. On the other hand, the sending of a Chinese princess as the wife of the king and her arrival in Tibet in 641 are confirmed by both Chinese sources and an old Tibetan manuscript. Unfortunately, this manuscript says nothing about the place where the princess was received. The Chinese sources identify this princess in a less prestigious way than the Tibetan accounts like to do: she was simply one of the imperial princesses who formed a kind of reserve from which they could pass one off as a daughter of the Emperor to satisfy the request of a "Barbarian". However, the Chinese documents contradict each other on the existence of walled towns or villages in Tibet at this

<sup>8</sup> This is a genre of texts discredited by a good number of Tibetan authors. The "treasure-texts" would have been hidden during the royal era in order to be rediscovered at the appropriate time by predestined beings.

<sup>9</sup> The top of this valley, oriented roughly north-south, is connected by a high pass with another valley that opens onto the site of Samye—the first Tibetan monastery—on the banks of the Tsangpo, which one crosses to quickly get downstream to the Yarlung Valley, cradle of the monarchy. This place of birth confirms, it seems, that Songtsen Gampo's father indeed achieved the annexation of this region near Lhasa; it can easily be imagined that the Lhasa plain, once controlled—where, according to some Tibetan historians, there were at the time mountain pastures and woods of various species—provided a place of deployment for the royal camp much more satisfactory than the narrow Gyama Valley. It was also a strategically important place, commanding at the same time the Kyichu Valley and that of Tölung to the west.

time. For some, Songtsen Gampo would have decided to build his Chinese wife a palace surrounded by a wall and modern Chinese authors see this as the Ramoche, the temple erected to accommodate the statue brought from China. And yet, according to some presumptions, this temple would have been built only at the time of the second Chinese princess given in marriage to a Tibetan king in 710. Other old Chinese documents, describing Tibetan customs, assert that the kings lived in a large tent capable of holding a hundred people, and moved often. This description seems more likely to be true. It is therefore difficult to believe that even a village existed on the site of Lhasa when Songtsen Gampo's Chinese wife arrived. Nevertheless, in several Buddhist edicts engraved on stone-pillars, promulgated by this king's successors, the Miraculous Apparition (Trülhang) Temple of Rasa is always mentioned among the temples he is credited with founding.

*Lhasa's Names*

And so, the first known name for the site is Rasa.<sup>10</sup> It must be noted, however, that this name appears in the Tibetan annals only in 710, with the mention that the king (Tride Tsugtsen) received his Chinese wife, *Jin cheng*, the second princess sent to a Tibetan sovereign, at the Stag's Wood of Rasa. The obvious meaning of this term is effectively "land (or place) of the goats" and the Tibetans—fond of etymologizing a posteriori, made easy by this monosyllabic language where homophones are numerous—were able to find in it one of the constituent elements of the legend's development. But the name could also be a contracted form of the expression *rawe sa* which means "place surrounded by a wall"; one would then understand the late appearance of the toponym, at a time when, undoubtedly, the Miraculous Apparition Temple and its outbuildings were surrounded by an enclosing wall.<sup>11</sup> (At the beginning of the 20th century the city of Lhasa still retained the remains of a wall with doors.) Be that as it may, the rare mentions of the site continue to call it Rasa; it is only in the text of the treaty signed between China and

<sup>10</sup> Nowhere in the old documents is mention made of a toponym which, even distorted, could conjure up that of the Milk Plain of later sources.

<sup>11</sup> Until now, the monastic complex of Samye founded in the middle of the 8th century, as well as more recent monasteries, is enclosed in this way.

Tibet in 822, text engraved on a stone-pillar that has remained through the centuries, that the name of Lhasa—Land (or Place) of the Gods—appears for the first time. But does this name refer to a town, whatever its size? In fact, even later Tibetan documents are clear on this point: Lhasa formerly referred only to the temple of the Jowo; it was therefore the Place Where the God Resides.

Confirmation is found in the expression adopted by a historian recounting the transfer of the Jowo statue, which was “invited to go from the Ramoche to the Lhasa”. These two temples are sometimes called “the two temples of the Lords”, the two Jokhangs, because the statue of the Mikyö Dorje Buddha is also known as the Little Lord, and, more convincing, one finds them also called “the two Lhasas”.

This transformation of the toponym—from Rasa to Lhasa—is indicative of the profound transformation brought about by the adoption of Buddhism. With time, names that are more and more glorious will be given to the temple of the Jowo. But, above all, its influence will be such that it will impose its name on the town formed around it, and even on the region, which, sanctified in that way, will truly be the “Land of the Gods”. So, a pious description of the holy place of Yerpa which is found about thirty kilometres north of Lhasa can state: “Lhasa is the vital axis of Tibet. The vital axis of Lhasa is Yerpa. If the *chorten* of Yerpa is not destroyed, Buddhism will always remain in Lhasa.”

*From Songtsen Gampo to the Fall of the Monarchy*

The history of Lhasa remains just as obscure during this era. Among the old documents, Tibetan annals provide invaluable information on the sovereigns' way of life. Far from being settled, with the consolidation of the empire, they moved across their territory, from summer residences to winter residences. Among the places mentioned from now on, the Lhasa Valley appears: the king meets the Council there several times, he holds a court of justice there, but without any particular pre-eminence being accorded to this residence. Yet, it is at Lhasa that King Tride Tsugtsen (reigned 712–755)—known in later tradition by the nickname of “Bearded Ancestor” (Me Atshom)—receives the second Chinese princess, Jincheng. From Chinese sources, we learn that the emissaries from China met the

king in his tent, the impressiveness of which they described; it was found in open country, at the centre of a large encampment consisting of three lines of tents. It is difficult to decide if this represented the king's usual form of residence, or a military encampment. We should not think, however, that all Tibetans lived in tents and did not know about stone buildings: recent archaeological excavations prove the existence of various types of housing from the palaeolithic period and, later, Tibetan military architecture produced impressive monuments which show a mastery of construction techniques that are undoubtedly very old. But, at this time, the most reliable documents do not mention the existence of a village around the two temples of Lhasa.

For later tradition in any case, the interest remains focused on the statue of the Jowo and the temple that houses it. It tells how the princess Jincheng, as soon as she arrived in Lhasa, wanted to visit the Ramoche temple constructed by her “aunt”, the princess Wencheng. Not finding the Jowo statue there, she went to the Miraculous Apparition Temple and, seeing—through her foreknowledge—where it had been hidden, she took it out, placed it in the centre of the temple and established the cult which it has been honoured by ever since. But the statue had to experience new vicissitudes. While the son of Me Atshom, Trisong Detsen (reigned from 755 to 797?), was still too young to rule, the kingdom was governed by ministers hostile to Buddhism; they decided to get rid of the statue by sending it back to China. Though they called for more and more porters, up to a thousand men according to one version, they could not move the statue beyond a place near the temple and they decided to bury it in the sand. But calamities rained down upon the country and the soothsayers who were consulted revealed that the cause of these troubles was the burying of the statue; it was then dug up and taken to the Nepal border, whence the king, upon coming of age, had it brought back. (The illogicality of this story, where the second move seems to pose no problem, does not bother the Tibetan chroniclers!) Finally, when the last king of the lineage, Lang Darma (reigned from 836 to 842?), persecutor of Buddhism according to later tradition, decided to abolish this religion in Tibet, he ordered that the two temples of Lhasa be turned into stables or even animal slaughter houses. The lay faithful again hid the two statues, this time under their respective thrones.

If we come back to the more reliable old documents, we can

conclude that, during all of the royal era, Lhasa is not considered to be the seat of government. Some kings build "palaces" elsewhere, where they prefer to reside: Drakmar near Samye, and Onchangdo much down-river from Lhasa, to cite only the most famous. Nevertheless, a monastic community must have existed in Lhasa from the time of Trisong Detsen, since it is there that three religious foreigners—the Chinese Mahayana and the two Indians, Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava—who, for later tradition, shaped Tibetan Buddhism, were first directed. However, their first meeting with the king did not take place at Lhasa, but at Drakmar.

Nevertheless, the specific importance of Lhasa is assured from this period; proof of this lies in the fact that it was the site chosen to erect at least two engraved stone-pillars that have come down to us: one in front of the present Potala, carrying an edict of Trisong Detsen in praise of a faithful minister; the other in front of the Jokhang, carrying the Tibetan and Chinese text of the peace treaty concluded between Tibet and China in 822. Finally, when the same Trisong Detsen, ordering his subjects to convert, built, at Samye, the first Tibetan monastery—thus renewing and consolidating the founding action of his ancestor Songtsen Gampo—he had an order engraved on a stone-pillar still present at Samye. This order—that worship and offerings at the Miraculous Apparition Temple and at his newly founded monastery never be interrupted—shows that he accorded these two monuments the same symbolic value. It is therefore indisputable that, from the royal era, the Jokhang is considered the centre and guarantor of this new Buddhist order desired by the sovereigns. It is this temple which gives Lhasa its importance, importance that has not declined to this day and which is expressed in the symbolism of the heart of the demoness that had to be subjugated in order to substitute there the very heart of Buddhist Tibet.

The question remains as to what reasons could have led to the choice of precisely this site for the erection of this symbolic building. It is clear that in the territorial division of the Tibetan empire, based on the organization of the army corps into "wings", or encampments, the Lhasa Valley belonged to the Central Wing, Üru, a vast area that went, roughly, from Phenpo in the north to Yarlung in the south. This notion of central part of the territory has survived in the classic designation of Ü, "centre, middle", which we render by "central province". In this area, the Lhasa plain was the largest open place and constituted an important strategic point since it com-

manded three important routes: the route from the south along the lower course of the Kyichu, more accessible than the high pass of the Gyama Valley; the route from the east and the north-east along the upper course of the Kyichu; and the route from the north-west, by way of the Tölung Valley. The site could be defended, finally, by fortifications erected on the two hills blocking its access from the west: Marpori and Chakpori as they are known today. One can then suppose that this very representation of the territory dictated the construction of the temple at its strategic centre.

*Lhasa, Religious City (9th–17th Centuries)*

It must be emphasized that during this period, which extends from the fall of the monarchy to the accession of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the centre of political power is not yet situated in Lhasa. At the death of the last king, Lang Darma, his two sons divided the empire between themselves and Lhasa went to one of them; but, as has been pointed out, this version comes from much later authors who also report revolts by the subjects and fratricidal conflicts, without indicating the fate of Lhasa. In reality, the thread of history is taken up again only at the beginning of the 11th century, when Buddhism again blossoms, this time permanently. What had been the powerful Tibetan empire then finds itself split up into an autonomous kingdom that covers the western provinces, and, in the centre and the east, principalities of which little is known. In this political vacuum, we see the gradual growth of influence of eminent religious figures who enjoy the protection of local lords, receive gifts of land and gain wealth; they found powerful monasteries that are at the origin of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism and that gradually, gaining strength as they expand throughout the country, are going to compete with the civil power. These monasteries are also going to enter into conflict among themselves to establish their hegemony. Some will succeed with outside help from the Mongol descendants of Genghis Khan: the Sakyapa in the 13th century, the Phagmo Drupa in the 14th century. These will nominally retain the title of kings of Tibet up to the 17th century but their power was being destroyed by the rise in power of the governors that they had appointed in Rinpong, in Tsang Province, west of the central province of Lhasa. According to which monastic power is dominant, the "capital" can

be said to move: Sakya in Tsang; then Ne'udong Monastery, seat of the Phagmo Drupa, and the town of Tsethang which is associated with it, where the Yarlung Valley opens out.

### *The City of Lhasa and its Inhabitants*

From the royal era onwards, we know that temples were founded around the two "Residences of the Lords". It is probable that a town was built up gradually around these prestigious monuments, accommodating the craftsmen who worked on their improvements and modifications and, when the pilgrimage to the Jokhang became the goal of every Tibetan, attracting the trade that goes hand in hand with every place of pilgrimage: the sale of incense, butter for the lamps, ceremonial scarves, construction of inns for the pilgrims, and so on. But while the number of temples and monasteries inside the town increased considerably with time, the town itself seems never to have had a great expansion. In 1904, the British officers were surprised by its small size . . . and its dirtiness; they estimated the population at 30,000 inhabitants, of whom 20,000 were monks! They delivered a terse assessment claiming that the inhabitants of Lhasa were counted "in monks, in women, and in dogs"! For them, women numbering in the majority was explained by, among other reasons, the monastic celibacy embraced by the men. The predominance of women, in any case, had to be a permanent feature of the town, as an oral tradition from Amdo, the north-eastern province of Tibet, attributes it to revenge taken by the famous minister Gar.<sup>12</sup> His power had become too great and was seen as a threat to Songtsen Gampo, who exiled him to Amdo where he became blind. But Gar was the only one who knew how to build the Jokhang. An emissary of the king drew the necessary information from him by trickery, but finally realizing the deception, Gar gave false advice: it was necessary to place at the top of the temple—thereby dominating the Jowo, which is on the ground floor—the image of the feminine deity Palden Lhamo, which they did. This is the reason why the women of Lhasa "have their head higher than the men".

There also appeared early on a not-inconsiderable colony of Newar

<sup>12</sup> This minister of Songtsen Gampo is considered to have played a determining role through his intelligence and skill in the Chinese and Nepalese marriages of the king.

craftsmen and Chinese and Kashmiri merchants, the latter being Muslims. It is difficult to be precise about the size of this colony and even the composition of the population of Lhasa at the time we are interested in: the documents say nothing about this. Civilian life does not concern the Tibetan historiographers; only religious history holds their attention. Lhasa is often cited in the hagiographies of personages who put their mark on this religious history; we learn of the retreats they made there, the teachings they gave there, the restorations or improvements they made to the Jokhang and the works they sponsored for the reinforcement of the dykes on the Kyichu. The latter is an activity that can appear to be a civil work but which, it will be seen, has a religious goal.

### *The Fate of the Jokhang*

The fall of the monarchy with the assassination of the last king, Lang Darma, in the middle of the 9th century, marks an era of trouble and civil war: power is broken up and, consequently perhaps, for a period of more than a century we have no contemporary document. Later historians give contradictory information on the preservation of Lhasa's two temples. According to one of the more trustworthy, they were left in a state of neglect and became the lair of beggars who transformed all the chapels into kitchens whose smoke completely blackened the holy images. It is only at the end of the 11th century that a religious figure by the name of Zanskar the Translator<sup>13</sup> would have, with the help of a local headman, returned the building to its original purpose: he built houses outside for the beggars; then, having kept his armed men out of sight, he lured the beggars outside by offering them a feast, with a distribution of alms; meanwhile the soldiers took possession of the premises. He erected new statues, including the guardian deities of the doors.

When Atisha—the Indian saint who is one of the principal architects of the revival of Buddhism, first in western Tibet where he arrived in 1042—went to central Tibet (where he died in 1054) he did not stay in Lhasa, but well down-river, at Nyethang. His biographies recount that, invited to Lhasa by one of his disciples, he saw from

<sup>13</sup> Born in Zanskar, a Tibetan region in north-west India, hence his name, he was a disciple of Gampopa (1079–1153), the founder of the Kagyupa school.



a distance a great light emanating from the Jokhang and he wanted to know the history of this temple. (Another version says that he was received by a white man who was none other than Avalokiteshvara and that, seeing the excellence of the images and the buildings, he asked the history of the construction.) No one was able to explain this history to him, which leaves us to assume, if the anecdote is supported by genuine facts, that the temple actually came to be neglected. It is then that an old woman known as "the holy mad-woman of Lhasa" but in reality of supernatural essence, prophesied that he would find this history in a pillar of the temple, decorated with tree leaves. Atisha discovered the text, "Testament of Songtsen Gampo", and had it copied by his disciples. Till today, this "treasure text"—whose authenticity seems questionable to Western scholars—has remained one of the principal sources on which Tibetan historians rely for the life of Songtsen Gampo and the construction of the temples of Lhasa. It is said that Atisha stayed for some time at Lhasa to teach and preach.

If we believe the same author cited above, after the forced takeover that restored the Jokhang to a place of worship, there were four monks who established or re-established a community in the temple. (These four were among the first monks of central Tibet ordained after the fall of the monarchy; they had sought ordination in Amdo where the monastic tradition had survived.) But towards the middle of the 12th century, discord arose between the congregations formed around two of them; armed troops fought in the temple itself, which was devastated. A disciple of Gampopa, Gompa Tsultrim Rinchen (1116–1162), intervened as mediator and he restored the temple, moving the statue of the Jowo from a southern chapel where it had been placed to the central chapel (its present location). He entrusted the two temples of Lhasa to the care of one of his disciples, known as Gunthang Lama Zhang (1123–1193) from the name of the monastery of Tsel Gunthang which he founded.<sup>14</sup> This monastery will be encountered again when we take up the question of political power in Lhasa.

It would be tedious to note all the references to sojourns by holy personages in Lhasa: the offerings to the two "Lords", the sermons, the retreats, the visions of the Jowo, the teachings he delivers in per-

<sup>14</sup> This monastery is situated about fifteen kilometres east of Lhasa; its name, in fact, includes two distinct monasteries: see below p. 31.

son, are recurrent. Similarly, comments abound on the improvements, the adornments offered to the statue, the restoration (and restructuring), sometimes after the statue had shed real tears of sadness at the state of neglect of its residence. History has also kept the memory of particularly munificent personages: kings of Purang, in western Tibet, who had a golden roof erected on the chapel of the Jowo; religious hierarchs who offered a canopy of gold above the statue, monumental butter lamps of gold, and so on. When these scattered references are put together, an image of contrast is formed of the fate of the principal temple and, consequently, the town: moments of splendour and religious activity when a powerful patron took it under his protection, moments of near abandonment in periods of political trouble and internal wars.

#### *Construction and Maintenance of the Dykes*

The overflowing of the Kyichu in the flat plain of Lhasa must have presented a permanent danger judging by the care given throughout history to the construction and reinforcement of dykes. Today, drainage works have been conducted but at the beginning of the 20th century, the British described a marshy terrain, traces of which are found in some of the toponyms given to the Lhasa plain by later historians. Because of the shape and nature of its ground surface, Tibet is subject to river flooding that is particularly spectacular and devastating; a proverb takes account of this and counsels: "Before the water arrives, build dykes; before the accident occurs (caused by demons) perform an exorcism". To this worry, shared by all their compatriots, the inhabitants of Lhasa added another: the oral tradition said that if water were to overrun Lhasa—which must be understood here as the Jokhang—the statue of the Jowo would be taken by the water deities into their subterranean residences. This is why they took great care to maintain the dykes. Until recent times, each year, the last day of the Great Prayer (of which we shall speak further), the monks of Drepung and Sera monasteries have assembled on the river bank, reinforced the dykes using rocks—piles of which were always waiting there, having been gathered from the river bed in the dry season—and recited prayers and ritual wishes to remove the danger of flooding.

As always in Tibet, these works in the public interest have as their proclaimed aim the protection of the Buddhist doctrine, in this case

represented by the two Jokhang temples, and they are justified by prophecies attributed to the earliest participants in the conversion of Tibet. The first of these was Songtsen Gampo: his instructions on the merits gained by acts of worship made at the temple of Rasa, by its restoration and by the maintenance of the dykes, would have been put in writing and hidden in various places in the temple. He would have also left to his son, in oral testament, the order to carry on the worship of the holy images and to maintain the dykes: the offerings and prayers addressed to them would assure the realization of all the wishes of Tibetans. Then, because in the future it would be necessary to repair the damage done during floods, he ordered him to hide the necessary wealth as "treasures". The prince assembled much wealth and hid it in the temple, pronouncing the vows that would make the treasures be discovered by the beings predestined for them. Innumerable prophecies are also attributed to the Master Padmasambhava who, at the time of Trisong Detsen, according to tradition, subdued the native deities—thus permitting the construction of Samye—and introduced tantric Buddhism. He is the central figure of the school of The Ancients (Nyingmapa) and the initiator of the tradition of "treasure texts". One of these prophecies foretells, to the king, the end of his line and the fall of the dynasty. Then, the internal struggles among Tibetans will disturb the supernatural powers and, for this reason, the elements will be disturbed: one day, Lhasa will be destroyed by water, and Samye by fire; (several fires have in fact ravaged Samye). It is necessary, therefore, to maintain the dykes built by Songtsen Gampo.

It is not surprising that among the most active in the maintenance of the dykes one finds the religious figures who are the very ones who brought to light all these "treasure texts", of which a good number would have been hidden, as we have seen, in the Jokhang itself. This tradition preserves the memory of a list of masters who distinguished themselves in this work, sometimes in an original way: one of them, at the end of the 12th century (for one later author, he would be at the origin of the dykes protecting the Jokhang) would have used his magic powers to make rocks fly through the air and be put down at night on the banks of the Kyichu where the astounded population of Lhasa found them in the morning. (These rocks were from the mountain called Yarlha Shampo, above the Yarlung Valley to which it gives its name; it is also the "god of the territory", *yuil lha*, for the dynasty.) Once it is known that this master was the son

of the first recognized reincarnation of Trisong Detsen, this fantastic account takes on a different significance: it revitalizes the submission of the ancient monarchy to Buddhism. Probably more trustworthy is the biography of the master Zhikpo Lingpa, a famous discoverer of "treasure texts". Written by his disciple, this biography asserts that in 1554 Zhikpo Lingpa built a temple in Lhasa in order to remove the danger of floods. What became of this temple, which is not otherwise mentioned, is not known. But the care of the restoration of the temples and the maintenance of the dykes was not the sole prerogative of the Nyingmapa school; one comes across similar accounts in the biographies of masters of other schools. In particular, the Kagyupa school, which stemmed from the teachings of the great mystic and poet Milarepa, showed itself to be very active. Let us recall that Zanskar the Translator, the first restorer of the Lhasa temples remembered by history, belonged to this school, as well as Tsultrim Rinchen, who settled the quarrels between the monastic communities by entrusting the care—that is to say the ownership—of the temples to his disciple, Lama Zhang.

#### *The Successive Masters of Lhasa and its Region*

We have noted the tradition according to which Lhasa came under the rule of one of Lang Darma's sons (and then his descendants). Here again, more reliable information appears only at the time of the second diffusion of Buddhism. The first restorer of the Jokhang, Zanskar the Translator, carried out the expulsion of beggars from the temple with the support of a lay headman and his troops; but while history has recorded the name of this headman, Dölchung Korpön, in other respects nothing is known. Was he the local lord? This seems plausible but we cannot be sure. Very quickly, in any case, power over the region is going to pass into the hands of the descendants of Lama Zhang.

To insure the protection and operation of Lhasa's two temples, Lama Zhang founded first the monastery of Tsel (1175) and then that of Gunthang (1187).<sup>15</sup> The sources do not provide a complete

<sup>15</sup> Later sources combine them in a single term: Tsel Gunthang, as indicated above, without it being very clear if Tsel refers here to the monastery or the principality; Lama Zhang's political successors and spiritual heirs were actually called Tsel-pa, "those of Tsel", whereas the monastery of Gunthang was the more important.

picture, but it must be assumed that Tsel already formed a small principality east of Lhasa because, at the time of his death, Lama Zhang handed over possession of the two temples to his spiritual son and factotum who, at the same time, was chosen as political head of Tsel. His successors, who also held political and religious power, gradually expanded their territory, until they dominated the whole Lhasa region. The "double" monastery of Tsel Gunthang blossomed to an extraordinary extent, thanks to the activity of its learned masters and it became one of the richest in Tibet. On the political level, the heads of Tsel enjoyed the favour of Khubilai Khan and for a time their power rivalled that of the Sakyapa, with whom they allied themselves when the Sakyapa became the representatives of the Mongol authority in Tibet. When the great statesman Changchub Gyeltsen (1302-1364) entered into conflict with the Sakyapa to impose the power of the Phagmo Drupa, Tsel maintained its alliance and its power fell with that of the Sakyapa; the monastery lost the majority of its lands and declined.

Changchub Gyeltsen, master of Tibet, substituted his administration for that of the Mongols and instituted a new territorial division under the authority of governors of local fortresses. Lhasa and its region passed into the jurisdiction of one of his loyal followers whom he named governor of the fortress of Nel, a little down-river from Lhasa. Although these governors were appointed theoretically for only three years, this one managed to stay in charge and turn it into a hereditary fiefdom which his descendants held on to, with the title of Governors of Nel, up to the end of the 15th century. At this point, they lost their power by the same mechanism that had launched their rise.

In Tsang Province, the governor of the fortress of Rinpung had followed the same path as had the governors of Nel: taking the name of the district that he was charged with administering, he established a hereditary fiefdom, taking advantage of the weakening of Phagmo Drupa power caused by problems of succession and internal conflict. At the end of the 15th century, the princes of Rinpung were de facto masters of Tsang Province and a good part of the central province. At this time, political conflict was doubled by a fierce rivalry between two powerful religious schools: a branch of the Kagyupa, the Karma Kagyupa, whose principal monastery, Tsurphu, was situated about fifty kilometres north-west of Lhasa; and the Gelukpa, the last to be founded, of which we shall speak again. The

governors of Nel were the protectors of the Gelukpa, while the Rinpung princes supported the Karma Kagyupa. The latter had tried in vain to establish a monastery in Lhasa. The head of Rinpung launched several attacks against the governor of Nel and succeeded in seizing several districts. He found an ally in a discontented district administrator of the governor of Nel and, when Rinpung troops had captured Lhasa and the territories of Nel in 1498, this administrator was rewarded with a gift of land and subjects, with the title of governor of Kyichö, the name of the region up-river from Lhasa. His descendants expanded their territory and became masters of the whole Lhasa region. Switching their alliances, they also made themselves the protectors of the Gelukpa, to whom it is time to turn our attention.

### *The Gelukpa*

Far from the troubles of central Tibet, the founder of this school, Tsongkhapa, was born in Amdo in 1355. Dedicated to the religious life from the age of three years, he received his initial training under a lama who had himself sojourned in the central provinces where, at the time, intellectual and religious life was concentrated. This is why, at the age of sixteen, Tsongkhapa decided to go there. Following common practice of the time, he went from monastery to monastery to receive teachings from the most highly renowned masters. Very quickly, his outstanding qualities in philosophical debates made him famous and he was invited to teach and debate in various monasteries of the two central provinces. Also very quickly, disciples gathered around him, and with them he made frequent sojourns in Lhasa, meditating on Marpori or before the statue of the Jowo.

Although he led an itinerant life, responding to the invitations of local lords or distant monasteries, Lhasa seems to be a fixed point to which he always returned, staying in retreats in the vicinity, where he wrote most of his works. Perhaps this was because of the attraction of the Jokhang, perhaps also because the governor of Nel was his most important protector.

It is in one of these retreats, overhanging the future site of Sera Monastery a kilometre north of the town, that, exhorted by a vision of the *bodhisattva* Manjushri, he decided to establish at the Jokhang the celebration of a Great Prayer (*Mönlam chenmo*) for the good of beings and to hasten the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya,

which will herald a new Golden Age. He informed the governor of Nel, who undertook restoration works on the Jokhang and began the preparations. For his part, Tsongkhapa sent disciples to solicit donations, which flooded in, from the big monasteries and lay lords throughout the central province. Craftsmen were put to work cleaning, repainting and regilding mural paintings and statues (which had apparently been left without maintenance), a job done so well that afterwards they appeared to be new. They sewed new garments for the statues from lengths of magnificent brocade which had been donated and they totally renewed the decoration of the temple. In the first month of the year 1409, during the celebration commemorating the miracles of the Buddha, Tsongkhapa offered a diadem and jewelled ornaments to the two statues, the Jowo and the Mikyö Dorje, giving them the appearance they have kept to the present day. This transformation also provoked a theological controversy on the part of Tsongkhapa's adversaries, who claimed that transforming the appearance of the statues, from a monkish to a princely one, would bring misfortune to the country.

The ceremonies, accompanied by unimaginable offerings, were repeated for sixteen days running. Each day, a different donor, lay or religious, covered the expenses, including those incurred for the feeding of the thousands of monks present. Lay people also crowded in in great number, fervent and attentive to the teachings, to the extent that not a quarrel or a drunken man was reported! This Great Prayer of Lhasa was thereafter celebrated each year—except for an interval of nineteen years, from 1498 to 1518, when the town had fallen into the hands of the Rinpungpa and the Karma Kagyupa became the masters of the ceremonies—by the school founded by Tsongkhapa, the Gelukpa (the "Virtuous"), and it attracted a greater and greater number of pilgrims.

We have lingered somewhat, in describing the magnificence of this first celebration of the Great Prayer of Lhasa because, while it shows the amazing prestige that Tsongkhapa enjoyed, it also poses a number of questions to which the sources do not respond. The first question focuses, of course, on the reasons that led this master to choose Lhasa to institute such a ceremony; after all, the "capital" was still Ne'udong, seat of the Phagmo Drupa, sovereigns of Tibet. Tsongkhapa had, moreover, stayed there at the invitation of the sovereign who, upon being solicited, was also one of the donors for the Great Prayer. The Master's biographies inform us of Tsongkhapa's habit of prac-

tising this Great Prayer in private, wherever he was; but the decision to celebrate it in Lhasa is briefly attributed to a vision that he had. Without putting his mystic realizations in doubt, one can wonder if his intention was not directed by several reasons: The favourable circumstance that the powerful governor of Nel, master of Lhasa and of the Jokhang, was his protector? The incessant troubles and armed conflicts between different factions, in central Tibet, which made a big ceremony particularly opportune to ask for peace? However that might be, the preparations and the celebration of the Great Prayer reveal the interdependence of politics and religion, a characteristic of power in Tibet since the second diffusion of Buddhism.

Another question concerns the choice of the sites where (even in the lifetime of Tsongkhapa) the three monasteries that were going to become the largest in Tibet were founded: Ganden, about forty kilometres east of Lhasa, a little before the Gyama Valley; and near Lhasa, Drepung to the west, Sera to the north. The founding of these monasteries, so close to each other in time (1409, 1416 and 1419) attests, if it were necessary, to the rapid success of Tsongkhapa's preaching. We are told that at least a thousand monks accompanied him in his movements and it was at the request of his disciples that the master, at the end of his life, agreed to found a monastery; this was Ganden, the founding of the other two being the work of two of his disciples. The biographies of the founders report only prophecies and visions that determined the choice of sites. It is mentioned that Tsongkhapa even inquired to know if the land at Ganden was empty and did not have an owner. This seems difficult to believe, knowing the land-ownership system in central Tibet, where the land always belonged, ultimately, to the lord, lay or monastic. Moreover, all instances of monasteries being founded show that they were accomplished in the first place through the granting of lands and subjects.

Here again, it is probably necessary to explain this "encirclement" of Lhasa by Gelukpa monasteries, by the alliance of political power and religious prestige: the Tselpa had used the same procedure to take control of Lhasa and its region. Unlike the Tselpa however, the Gelukpa, over two centuries, did not hold political power directly and their fate remained subject to the good fortune and misfortunes of their protectors. So it is, as we have seen, that the defeat of the governors of Nel led to the expulsion of the Gelukpa from Lhasa and their replacement by the Karma Kagyupa who, far from abolishing the Great Prayer founded by their rival, maintained its celebration

for nineteen years. This simple fact shows clearly that the symbolic power of the Jokhang had not weakened.

At the death of Tsongkhapa, one of his disciples was chosen to succeed him on the throne of Ganden, as head of the school. However—except for this office of “holder of the throne” which, up to the present day, is the result of a choice—the Gelukpa adopted the principle of succession by reincarnation, *tulku*, first used among the Karma Kagyupa and which became generalized in Tibet over time. It is in this way that the reincarnation of an eminent disciple of Tsongkhapa, Gedun Drub (1391–1474),<sup>16</sup> was recognized, in the person of Gedun Gyatso (1475–1542). The latter studied and resided at Tashilunpo and at Drepung where he built a residence which he named Ganden Phodrang (“palace of the paradise of joy”), which experienced an unforeseen fortune when the Fifth Dalai Lama chose it as the name of his government. This fortune was all the more unpredictable at the time of its construction since, while the Gelukpa were returned to Lhasa and regained control of the Great Prayer, they also knew some very dark days: attacked from everywhere, they lost a number of monasteries in central Tibet, monasteries that passed into the hands of different branches of the Kagyupa.

The beginning of their recovery was the work of Gedun Gyatso's reincarnation, Sonam Gyatso (1543–1588). Renowned as a scholar and preacher, he was also much sought after for his talents as a mediator; he settled the quarrel that had arisen in Lhasa itself between the supporters of the Gelukpa and those of the Kagyupa. It was he who instituted—after the Kyichu had burst its dykes and flooded Lhasa in 1562—the custom of the Drepung monks reinforcing the dykes on the last day of the Great Prayer. His fame brought him an invitation from the chief of a Mongol tribe, Altan Khan, with whom he established a relationship of religious master and patron, after the fashion of so many other Tibetan hierarchs since the 13th century.<sup>17</sup> In the course of an imposing ceremony laid on by Altan Khan, the two eminent men gave each other honorary titles: Sonam Gyatso received that of Dalai Lama—a mixture of Mongol and Tibetan usually understood as “Ocean of Wisdom Lama”—which

<sup>16</sup> He was the founder of the large monastery of Tashilunpo in Tsang.

<sup>17</sup> The Mongol prince promulgated an edict ordering his subjects to convert to Buddhism of the Gelukpa School, thus establishing the foundations of this school's influence among the Mongols.

became the designation best known in the West for this line of hierarchs. This title was applied retrospectively to his two predecessors and Sonam Gyatso thus became the Third Dalai Lama. At his death, the connection with the Mongols was reinforced by the recognition of his reincarnation in a child of the entourage of Altan Khan (for Tibetans, this was his grandson) who became the Fourth Dalai Lama. From this time, Mongols flocked to Lhasa: pilgrims, as well as monks coming for training in the three large Gelukpa monastic institutions. But the influence of the school also covered Tibet where numerous monasteries had been founded, from which many young monks also came to complete their studies. Gradually, Lhasa took on the image of intellectual and spiritual capital.

However, when the future Fifth Dalai Lama was born in 1617, the situation of the Gelukpa was dramatic. A battle raged between the various leaders, in an imbroglio where it is difficult to tell how much was about power and how much was about support for one side or the other in the quarrels between the Karma Kagyupa and the Gelukpa. The Tsang armies once again invaded the central province and attacked Lhasa in 1618; even the monks of Drepung and Sera took up arms. Many monks and inhabitants of Lhasa were killed. Defeated, some of the monks fled to monasteries further north and the rest were kept isolated in their monasteries by surrounding troops.

It was the intervention of a Mongol army that brought about peace negotiations, which were concluded in 1621, and the departure of the Tsang troops. This truce permitted the announcement of the discovery—hidden until then—of the Fifth Dalai Lama; however, he could not be installed at Drepung until 1625. The Mongol support proved to be the determining factor in the final triumph of the Gelukpa school. Emissaries of the Dalai Lama were sent to various converted tribes to ask for armed assistance. The head of the Khoshut, Gushri Khan, responded to this call. He came to Lhasa in 1638, disguised as a pilgrim, and received teachings from the Dalai Lama. In a ceremony before the Jowo, in the Jokhang, the Dalai Lama gave him the title of *Chögyel*, “King according to Buddhist Law”. Finally, from 1640 to 1642, Gushri Khan attacked and defeated the allies of the Karma Kagyupa in eastern Tibet, then marched on Tsang which was defeated, while the Regent of the Dalai Lama “liberated” the region of Lhasa. In a grand ceremony, Gushri Khan handed the Tibetan hierarch power over all of Tibet; from that

moment, the government was in the hands of the Dalai Lama, in this specific form which combined religious authority and political authority. It was also the first time since the royal era that the principles of a real centralizing power were re-established and the Fifth Dalai Lama deliberately chose Lhasa as the seat of his government, transferring his residence from Drepung Monastery to the Potala.

Thus, up until the 17th century, the importance of Lhasa was not political, but religious: it was the heart of Tibet, the place of residence of the Protector *par excellence*, the Jowo. With the Fifth Dalai Lama coming to power, the town effectively became the capital in the Western sense of the word. Seat of government and administration, it attracted noble families, who built their residences there. But for the Tibetan people, it became doubly holy, since residing there as well, on his sacred mountain of the Potala, is the protector of Tibet, Avalokiteshvara, in the form of the Dalai Lama.

### CHAPTER THREE

## THE POTALA, SYMBOL OF THE POWER OF THE DALAI LAMAS

Anne Chayet

The prime evocative image of Tibet is that of its mountains. It is therefore not surprising that for Tibetans they have been the initial image of the creative force. Moreover, the first king of Tibet descended from the sky on the summit of one of these mountains—mountains so numerous and so high that they seem to be pillars of the sky. Mountains were indeed seen this way since they were in a certain sense the parents of the new sovereign. Countless and of varying importance, the mountains of Tibet are not solely the ancestors of the royal dynasty, they are also united by subtle links of kinship and dependence that suggest a hierarchy of power. They also represent the harshness of a country where life seems to hang on their rages and their goodwill. Deified ancestors and principles of existence, they are the markers and beacons of a landscape as vast and stormy as the primordial ocean of which it was born long ago. They have also become the boundary markers of a world defined and organized according to the principles of Buddhism to which they have submitted themselves, without, however, losing their personality. Modest protector of a village or a valley, deity revered in all the country, or residence of its protective *bodhisattva*, they are the objects of worship and the goal of pilgrimages. The first royal palace crowned a rocky peak as if wanting to raise it up higher, and later, the most widespread monuments of Buddhism, *chorten*, sometimes raised to the dimensions of a temple, were built as mountains, at the edge of a new ideal and a renewed landscape.

The very multiplicity of these holy mountains makes the conception of a uniform and centralized power difficult: are the highest of them not precisely at the margins of the country? There has to be one, at the heart of the sanctuary, unquestionable and recognized by all. But there was none. It was therefore necessary to make one rise up and it is to this necessity that the religious tradition applied