STUDIES IN INDIAN AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Remembering the Lotus-Born

Padmasambhava

IN THE HISTORY OF TIBET'S GOLDEN AGE

Daniel A. Hirshberg

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Contents

Preface

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the eighth-century tantric adept Padmasambhava is not bound by time or history. As the Second Buddha inseparable from the three exalted buddha bodies, he transcends past, present, and future. Padmasambhava, the "lotus-born," is not just a man who attained enlightenment in the past; he persists as the timeless continuity of ultimate truth, representing its potency and rendering it accessible for all those who seek to realize it. And yet Tibetans have long been fascinated by the conventional details of his life as well. Nearly a millennium of biographical materials informs the countless devotional liturgies to Guru Rinpoché, as he came to be known throughout the Himalaya. Celebrated under their own literary genre known as *katang* (*bka' thang*) and often ascribed to Padmasambhava himself, these "testaments" are understood to illuminate indisputably the historical activity of a man, albeit a uniquely accomplished one, who accepted an imperial invitation to Tibet in the eighth century.

For as long as Tibetans have had Buddhism, many have maintained a keen interest in the past and its representation in text. The imperial era, when Buddhism was introduced and established as the state religion, became a topic of intense interest even as the dust still settled from the empire's ninth-century collapse. Historical accounts were composed, compiled, and recovered over the centuries, and critically minded Tibetans noted and attempted to reconcile the many discrepancies in the records that recount this period, among them Padmasambhava's sojourn and the extent of his activities. Western scholars seeking to clarify the events of this era thus join nearly a millennium of critical historiography that seeks to clarify the influential persons and events of this era, although guided by the perspectives, methodologies, and objectives of our present context.

The following endeavor makes no attempt to point out the ultimate reality of Padmasambhava, philosophically or otherwise. And yet this inquiry is complementary in that it seeks to clarify his conventional identity, not just in his terminal representation as a historical person but as the enduring focus of an eminently human process of re/constructing and remembering the past—

a continuous practice that occurs only in the present. Therefore, like its Tibetan antecedents, may this too be a lamp that illuminates the face of the Lotus-Born.

I would like to acknowledge a series of educators and advisors who encouraged me to find my own path and taught me to trust in it. I would have met few of them if not for the generosity of my parents, James and Diane Hirshberg. Kevin Jennings, Cynthia Katz, and Sandy Stott at Concord Academy, and Jan Willis and Gene Klaaren at Wesleyan University, all helped shape my thinking, writing, and modes of inquiry. I would not have proceeded into a PhD without the training and support of Phil Stanley in the much-too-short-lived Nitartha/Shedra track at Naropa University. At different times, I also benefited from the instruction and direction of Craig Preston, Jules Levinson, and Jeffrey Hopkins as well as Godwin Samararatne, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoché, and Tulku Thondup Rinpoché. Susan Morgan is a lamp on the path that illuminates the way. Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoché kindly bestows tools that pierce to the heart of my inquiry.

This book is a revision of my doctoral dissertation for the Committee on Inner Asian and Altaic Studies at Harvard University, which was funded by a Graduate Student Fellowship. I am indebted to my mentor and primary dissertation advisor, Leonard van der Kuijp, who upon first hearing of my interest in contrasting presentations of Padmasambhava suggested I have a look at Nyangrel's *Chos 'byung*. Both myself and my research were incalculably enriched by Leonard's breadth of knowledge, his willingness to share it, and his depth of kindness as a mentor. I would also like to thank my hosts while conducting research in Gangtok, Sikkim: it was delightful to be a perennial guest in the home of Séla Yeshé Dorjé and his family, and Acharya Lama Tshultshem Gyatso of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology clarified many opaque colloquialisms in Nyangrel's biographies. The Harvard Graduate Student Council and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies funded travel to relevant sites in Tibet in 2011. Several photographs from this excursion are printed within, and Gyurme Dorje was kind enough to offer rare photographs of Nyangrel sites that remain inaccessible at present. My dissertation benefited from the critiques of my committee: Janet Gyatso, David Germano, and Robert Mayer especially, who remains a wellspring of valuable advice. Lewis Doney offered detailed notes on the dissertation and digitally exchanged several *bka' thang* manuscripts with me, and Adam Krug and Michael Sheehy provided valuable feedback on specific chapters of the final manuscript.

The process of revision was initiated during a postdoctoral fellowship in the Religious Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara,

where I enjoyed the warm collegiality of José Cabezón, Greg Hillis, and Vesna Wallace. It was foremost completed during a postdoctoral fellowship with the "Kingship and Religion in Tibet" project, funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and hosted at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. I am grateful to the leader of the research group, Brandon Dotson, for providing the time, space, and dialogue to complete a much-improved revision. In the final stages, I value the work of my editor, David Kittelstrom, my copyeditor Harmony DenRonden, and the production staff at Wisdom Publications. Most recently I have appreciated the welcome of my colleagues in the Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where I finalized the manuscript for publication.

Having been hosted by many institutions, an equal number of unsung administrators have been invaluable for navigating so many distinct bureaucracies, ensuring that I arrived and often successfully departed: Mary Murray Coleman at Concord Academy; Giovannina Jobson of Naropa University; Margaret Lindsey and Lisa Simpson at Harvard University; Anna Balikci-Denjongpa at Tibetology; Shubra Agrawal at UCSB; Sandra Sucrow of LMU; and Cindy Toomey of UMW.

As the distances between these schools imply, over the time of this work my family has endured the upheaval of nearly annual cross-country if not intercontinental relocations, and I am deeply grateful for their extraordinary generosity, courage, and patience. With love and appreciation, this book is dedicated to our daughter, Milena, who is such a beaming source of joy and delight; to our sweet English setter, Bodha, who tolerated many kennels en route to residing on three continents; and to my wife, Eve Kagan, whose affection sustains me. She is my *mudrā*, my *sku zla*. The mere presence of her reminds me that anything is possible and it becomes so.

Introduction

For Tibetans there may be no individual more central to Tibetan history and the heart of Tibetan cultural identity than Padmasambhava, the "Lotus-Born" tantric guru of the eighth century. His vibrant biographical tradition, recovered as treasure texts from at least the twelfth century, apotheosizes Padmasambhava as the catalyst that successfully converted the animistic powers of Tibet's awesome natural landscape to Buddhism when all else had failed. At that time the emperor Tri Songdetsen (ca. 742–ca. 800) ruled over an empire so powerful that in 763 it sacked the capital of its neighbor and competitor, the great Tang dynasty, and the Tibetans briefly set their own proxy upon the throne of China. Having prevailed in these foreign conquests and established Tibet among the great regional powerhouses of the era, Tri Songdetsen sought to tame his domestic populace as well. While the earliest sources credit the coerced alignment of Tibet's clans as the voussoirs forming the arch of the Tibetan empire, post-imperial works often emphasize the interventions of a diverse and unruly taxonomy of spirits, ghosts, earthbound demons, and demigods that inhabited the features of the natural environment and roamed the landscape, interacting with its human inhabitants for good or ill.[1]

In Tibet seemingly minor environmental manipulations such as diverting a stream for irrigation or excavating earth to construct a foundation could provoke the wrath of these temperamental entities, thus Tibetans developed an array of rituals for placation, subjugation, exorcism, and so forth. As representatives of the indigenous religion, Tibet's earliest ritualists, known as Bön and Shen, primarily specialized in healing remedies for the living and funerary practices for the dead in reliance upon an array of apotropaic and divination technologies to facilitate both.[2] They would eventually be succeeded by Buddhist tantrikas who claimed to function as human interlocutors and emissaries to Tibet's nonhuman populations. Since digging a hole in the Tibetan

1. Dalton 2011, 59.

2. Dotson 2008, 43.

soil required propitiatory rites to placate agitated local spirits, then the introduction and promotion of a foreign religion could trigger a war. No detailed account can be reliably traced to the period of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism,[3] but subsequent reconstructions of this process in the centuries after the empire collapsed resolved upon a normative narrative: when Tri Songdetsen invites the ordained Indian abbot Śāntarakṣita to disseminate the Buddhist teachings, serve as court preceptor, and consecrate the ground for the construction of the first Tibetan monastery, environmental disasters assault the palaces and epidemics afflict people and animals alike. It is determined that the Tibetan spirits have risen in force to riot against these offenses, and the emperor has no choice but to delay his ambitions and regroup while the abbot is forced to fall back to a redoubt in Nepal. After the attacks launched by their adversaries subside, Tri Songdetsen compels Śāntarakṣita to return again, but the abbot admits that the abilities acquired through his exoteric Buddhist practice lack the firepower to challenge those they had provoked; only a fully enlightened master wielding the esoteric technologies of Buddhist tantra could overcome the host arrayed against them.

Śāntarakṣita thereby advises the emperor to employ the services of the world's most accomplished tantric adept, the one known as Padmasambhava, by inviting him to Tibet. Only he could subjugate and convert the rebellious malcontents that opposed Buddhism there. Emperor Tri Songdetsen dispatches messengers to the master's retreat in Nepal, and then Padmasambhava treks intrepidly through the Himalaya to the Tibetan plateau, battling Tibet's domestic divinities, subduing them with feats of martial thaumaturgy, converting them by force and binding them by oath to protect the Buddhist teachings as he blazes a path to the Tibetan court.

Whether authentically archaic or relatively late, all sources that describe the initial stages of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism in the eighth century generally agree up to this point, but the story then diverges into two contradictory narrative paths: one in which Padmasambhava establishes Buddhism and earns a most exalted status as "the Second Buddha" of the Tibetan people for perpetuity, and another where he soon departs ingloriously as a fleeting contributor and minor figure in Tibetan history. In the former, far more popular account, Tri Songdetsen, Śāntarakṣita, and Padmasambhava form a uniquely dynamic trio whose cooperation is essential to the establishment of Buddhism: Tri Songdetsen is the unwavering imperial patron who is determined to convert Tibet to Buddhism, invites both masters, sponsors the construction of the first monastery, Samyé Lhungidrupa, and initiates the great translation

3. Cantwell and Mayer 2007, 5–9.

project; Śāntarakṣita is the venerable conduit for the legitimate transmission of exoteric doctrine and monastic discipline; and Padmasambhava is the unconquerable master of tantric esoterica who single-handedly subdues the hostile demigods of the indigenous Tibetan landscape, prepares the ground for the construction and consecration of Samyé, and entrusts the most potent and prized soteriological technologies of Vajrayāna Buddhism to his Tibetan disciples. Padmasambhava enjoys an extended stay in Tibet, whereby he visits all the sacred sites, conceals countless texts and relics as consecrated "treasures" (*gter*) for later recovery, and departs after the death of Tri Songdetsen and the uncontested enthronement of his son, who pledges uninterrupted state support for Buddhism at the center of the Tibetan empire.

Even so, Tibetan Buddhists have emphasized for centuries that according to the ultimate, most authentic view, Padmasambhava never left Tibet. His physical presence (*sku*, "exalted form") pervades Tibet's sacred landscape interred as treasures still, and since the Buddhist teachings only became possible in Tibet by means of his original subjugations, all those instructions (*gsung*, "exalted speech") that reveal perfect buddha nature as the true essence of all sentient beings continuously resonate at the heart centers of the Tibetan people as the enlightened mind (*thugs*) of Padmasambhava. He is both cipher and simulacrum of the instructions he imparted, and therefore much more than a mere historical figure confined to time; he is the Precious Guru whose fundamental nature transcends time, revealing reality to all those who look to him. In fulfilling that function, Padmasambhava manifests in various aspects at the epicenters of countless ritual and meditative liturgies.

Dealing with questions of historiography, a significant issue is that the primacy of Padmasambhava's agency in Tibet's conversion is uniformly unattested in early sources. Scant evidence tethers his contributions to the thread of history, and what there is appears to have been amended amid the process of revisionary hagiography. Nevertheless, the story of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism starring Padmasambhava is the plot recounted by any Tibetan when asked about how Buddhism was definitively established there, and he even becomes an important source for contemporary Bön lineages, albeit with significant divergences in the narrative.[4] The ubiquity and significance of the Padmasambhava story is rivaled only by national myths identifying emperor Songtsen Gampo (d. ca. 649) as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, and both

4. For an overview of Bön depictions of Padmasambhava and his incorporation into their origins, see Achard 2004, x–xi and xxvi–xxix. For a Bönpo synopsis of Padmasambhava's life by Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–99), who was an advocate of Buddhist nonsectarianism and affiliated with Bön as well, see the translation in Zangpo 2002, 191–205.

were forged into more complete forms by many of the same twelfth-century treasure revealers. These two accounts are the twin foundation narratives of Tibetan cultural identity, the formative texts of the Tibetan people that persist in the present as a collective memory that bonds Tibetans by virtue of a common identity drawn from a correlate past. This function has become all the more critical as contemporary Tibetans continue to confront the pressure of Chinese administration in Tibet and the cultural diffusion of diaspora beyond it.

When Tibetans recount these stories they produce "forms of memory that are designed to stabilize a common identity,"[5] which may have been among the original impetuses that led to their elaboration as distinct syntheses in the twelfth century. At that time Tibetan culture was fractured more by forces from within than, as is the case today, by those from without. The unifying function of such shared "history" cannot be denied, even when analysis of early sources suggests that its ties to the actual occurrence of past events are tenuous. Historiographically savvy Tibetans recognized fundamental discrepancies between their sources as well, yet even in making such assessments, many scholars came to devalue ancient sources for those recovered in later centuries. Said to have been concealed during the imperium, these "treasures" were designated for later retrieval by karmically destined reincarnations of imperial-era figures.

In reliance upon the critical lenses of historiography and communicative memory, the social aspect of individual memory that highlights "the intermediary realm between individuals" and "grows out of intercourse between people,"[6] this book details the religious and textual innovations that produced the first complete revision of the story of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism at the apogee of the Tibetan empire, with Padmasambhava as its heroic protagonist. Since this narrative revises and reimagines the accounts of earlier sources, Tibetan and Western scholars alike have assumed that its first complete version, the *Copper Island Biography of Padmasambhava* (*Padma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar zangs gling ma*), was revealed as an apocryphal treasure text. However, by reassessing this narrative across its available recensions and performing the first thorough investigation of its author, tradent, and/or revealer, Nyangrel Nyima Öser (1124–92), it becomes clear that the designation of the *Copper Island* as a treasure text obscures the complex of indigenous innovations that made its production possible. Rather than the wholesale invention or simple "revelation" of a new narrative, the *Copper Island* was the product of the

5. Assmann 2006, 11.

6. Assmann 2006, 3.

Tibetan assimilation and transformation of core Indian Buddhist literary traditions and religious concepts that coalesced in Nyangrel, who is celebrated as the first of the great Buddhist treasure revealers.

As a scion of the imperial Nyang clan and the heir to religious transmissions that would come to cohere as the Nyingma or "Old" school, Nyangrel continues to be renowned for his lineages of fierce deity-yoga praxis and the Great Perfection, the recovery of ancient texts and relics as treasure, and the first complete hagiography of Padmasambhava, but he also had a transformative role in promoting serial or "catenate" reincarnation lineages, the myths that establish Avalokiteśvara as the patron deity of Tibet, and with those myths the pervasive resonance of the *maṇi* mantra throughout the Himalaya. By drawing these latter three together in particular, Nyangrel devised "the clearest blueprint for the later Tibetan religiopolitical construction" that would be actualized and perfected by the Dalai Lamas.[7] All of these can be traced through Nyangrel, who in relying on the threads of inherited traditions, knit these elements into innovative literary tapestries that remain part of the fabric of Tibetan Buddhism and culture to the present. Nyangrel was a progenitor of some of the most definitive aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, yet these very innovations ensured that he would be eclipsed by later adepts who, in adopting his claims and methods, revealed new iterations of his scriptures and narratives.

In highlighting Nyangrel's contributions to Tibetan culture in general and the Padmasambhava narrative in particular, this book explores his roles in the employment and advancement of: the hagiographical construction of enlightened identity in chapter 1;[8] karmic causality and catenate reincarnation theory in chapter 2; the mode of exclusively material textual recovery, augmentation, and reintroduction known as *treasure* in chapter 3; and historiography in chapter 4 through analyzing *Honey Nectar, the Essence of Flowers: A History of Buddhism* (*Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*), which features all but the first five of Nyangrel's forty-chapter Padmasambhava narrative within it. In drawing together the conclusions of the previous chapters, chapter 5 then problematizes long-held assumptions concerning Nyangrel's Padmasambhava narrative, clarifies its transmission, and concludes with new theses concerning its composition, which has been a persistent source of intrigue throughout the history of Tibetan studies. It concludes with an investigation of the roles of both individual and collective memory in the introduction of this seminal text as well as its persistence to the present.

As is the case with so many grand narratives, this story is more of a cultural

7. Kapstein 2000, 162.

8. An early version of this chapter was published as Hirshberg 2009.

product forged by the confluence of collective memory and myth than a historical one drawn primarily from ancient textual witnesses. Academics first questioned its historicity nearly as soon as Tibetan studies dawned as a critical discipline, and more recent research demonstrates that while there is little reason to doubt that Padmasambhava was a historical person, his actual influence in imperial Tibet and his role in its conversion to Buddhism were likely quite limited. Nevertheless, some of his most definitive character traits are already attested in post-imperial literature, and it is illuminating to review his earliest extant depictions before shifting to consider his full-blown articulation as the Second Buddha who, in the eyes of the Tibetan people, is comparable to (if not an emanation or even a reincarnation of) the first one, Siddhārtha Gautama of India, Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

Padmasambhava in Early Sources

While Padmasambhava does appear in post-imperial manuscripts, some of which may preserve content that originated during the imperium, none can be definitively ascribed to the eighth century, and thus some have questioned whether Padmasambhava was a historical person at all. Regardless, the conflicting accounts of his time in Tibet have inspired surveys of the earliest extant sources in an attempt to distinguish whoever he might have been from what he became. Padmasambhava has yet to be found described in or cited as the author of a single Indic text, thus only early Tibetan materials can provide any insight into this inquiry.[9] The limited source material includes the epigraphic record carved into stone during the reigns of the emperors in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the ancient manuscripts recovered from grottoes near Dunhuang in Chinese Turkestan, most of which were produced in the two centuries after the collapse of the empire. Before proceeding to the written evidence, we might first consider Padmasambhava's background through investigating the place from which he so famously hails.

Padmasambhava is said to be from Uḍḍiyāna (also, Oḍḍiyāna, Udyāna/Oḍyāna, Uḍḍayana/Oḍḍayana; Tib. O/U rgyan; Ch. Wuzhangna), a place whose thick cloak of esoteric mystique is nearly matched by the confusion con-

9. Mayer 2011b refutes previous hypotheses that *'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa*, a text also recovered from Dunhuang as IOL Tib J 321, is the sole, verifiably ancient document attributed to Padmasambhava. With regard to Padmasambhava's historicity, however, Mayer 2015b, 346, softens this authorial absence by noting that "not a single name comes down to us today from Indic sources of any Mahāyoga *siddha* of the late eighth century, even though we know several influential ones must have existed at that time."

cerning its geographical location. While some Chinese sources and the scholarship focusing on them suggest its location to be on the east Indian coast in the area of Orissa and others look much farther northwest to the Silk Road oasis of Kashgar, recent consensus resolves upon a verdant alpine valley just north of Peshawar in the Swat region of present-day Pakistan.[10] It is thus restricted to a relatively limited area, estimated to be five thousand *li* or about sixty-five miles in circumference by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who visited in 631.[11] As its renown expanded in Tibetan sources, however, so too did its total area: by the fourteenth century the *Testament of Padmasambhava* (*Padma bka' thang*) eulogizes Uḍḍiyāna as a paradise spread over two-thirds of the world's total landmass.[12] With close proximity to both the Karakorum and Khyber passes as well as the wealth of the Silk Roads that flowed through them, this region flourished for centuries under the Buddhist empire of Gandhāra that enjoyed its apogee from the first to fifth centuries C.E. With merchants and commerce pouring into the realm, various strains of Indian Buddhism arrived as well, and monastic institutions of both the earlier and later Buddhist traditions benefited from significant patronage.

This Uḍḍiyāna was accessed only by steep passes and remained somewhat isolated from the developments of the larger populations in the valley beneath it.[13] When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian (337–422) visited circa 400, he noted the presence of some five hundred monasteries exclusively in the tradition of the early Buddhist schools, but all of these had been destroyed by the time Xuanzang (602–64) returned in 631.[14] Mahāyāna Buddhism may have flourished following a devastating invasion that laid waste to those earlier establishments in the fifth century, but a new Silk Road that circumvented Peshawar became favored by the sixth century, such that the area continued its decline.[15] While Xuanzang notes that as many as eighteen thousand Buddhist monks formerly inhabited fourteen hundred monasteries in Uḍḍiyāna, only a smattering remained by the time of his survey, and very few could read Indic scriptures phonetically, never mind understand them.

10. The definitive discussion of Uḍḍiyāna in Swat is by Sanderson 2007, 265–69. Also see Davidson 2003, 209. Hodge 2003, 21 and 539–40n10, presents new hypotheses for its location in Kāñcī, one of which is that King Indrabhūti, Padmasambhava's adoptive father who returns with him to Uḍḍiyāna in his later hagiographical literature, is described as the ruler of Kāñcī in the *Biographies of the Eighty-Four Mahāsiddhas.*

11. Beal 1884, 119.

12. *Padma bka' thang*, 67.5–70.4.

13. Behrendt 2004, 23–24.

14. Beal 1884, 119n1.

15. Behrendt 2004, 25.

Nevertheless, Xuanzang describes the people of the region as devoted to Mahāyāna Buddhism and also reports that "they practice the art of using charms," magical incantations,[16] *dhāraṇī* if not the mantras of esoteric Buddhist practice that were hot technologies in India at the time of Xuanzang's travels. The Buddhist use of *dhāraṇī* may extend back to the time of the Buddha himself and is prevalent in both the early and later exoteric traditions, so in all likelihood they were introduced to Swat well before tantra developed in India, but this reference to incantation remains significant in that it may serve as one of very few indications suggesting the presence of Vajrayāna at any time in Swat's history. Another is a single rock sculpture from the region in which Anna Filigenzi discerns the severely abraded presence of what may have been a tantrika, perhaps even in Padmasambhava's common iconographical guise with the right hand raising a vajra and the left holding a skullcup.[17] In sum, however, Filigenzi admits that "the cultural blossoming [of Vajrayāna] has never been reflected in archaeological evidence in the territory of Swat," nor has any eighth-century textual evidence of tantric Buddhism been recovered from the area.[18] We know that the region was ruled by a series of Turkic Hindu-Śāhis throughout this period, however, and Uḍḍiyāna as Swat is foremost corroborated by the only extant inscription that mentions "Uḍyāna," which survives on the base of an eighth-century Gaṇeśa statue discovered nearby.[19]

Due to its association with Padmasambhava especially, Uḍḍiyāna came to be remembered as a mystical incubator of Vajrayāna in the Tibetan *imaginaire*, but the textual and archaeological record of Swat indicates that institutional Buddhism was in decline well before the eighth century, and there is no definitive evidence that esoteric Buddhism ever thrived there. Nevertheless, Kashmir, a hotbed of tantric innovation, was in relatively close proximity, and the decline of more conservative Buddhist institutions can introduce the opportunity for tantric Buddhism to flourish. Additionally, scriptures have not always survived even for well-established tantric sects, so it is certainly possible that Buddhist tantra persisted in Swat throughout this period. Whatever its location, Adam Krug aptly notes that scholars "appear to make the same move that emic tantric historiographers have made in placing Uḍḍiyāna, as the guarantor of authenticity in the tantric Buddhist world, in the closest proximity to their own disciplines as possible."[20] Regardless of whether Padmasambhava indeed

16. Beal 1884, 120.

17. Filigenzi 2003, 49.

18. Filigenzi 2003, 42.

19. Kuwayama 1991.

20. Adam Krug, personal communication, December 17, 2015.

originated from the Uḍḍiyāna of Swat or Orissa or elsewhere, he traveled to greater India and engaged the efflorescence of tantric Buddhism in the eighth century.

During his travels Padmasambhava would have discovered that northern India was already suffering its own tumultuous era with warring feudal states, decentralized authority, the decline of urban centers, and displaced populations in transit. Political and economic upheaval forced Buddhist centers to consolidate into larger institutions, and this era saw monastic universities like Nālandā and Odantapuri become international collectives as they magnetized Buddhist scholars and practitioners from greater Asia.[21] Among the most controversial topics on the peripheries of the esoteric curriculum were the recent Mahāyoga tantras, which employed antinomian and transgressive rhetoric concerning sex and violence, if not the advocation of their actualization in ritual practice. The novice Padmasambhava may have been a good candidate to enroll at one of these universities, but his lore presents him as ultimately eschewing the confines of institutionalization to tread the path of the *siddhas*, tantric exegetes who "operated on the margins of society, in the twilight zone between the forest and the fields, a place of potency and magic."[22] It was here that he is said to have perfected his abilities and gained such renown as a *vidyādhara*, a knowledge-holder or sorcerer, that his name would eventually reach the Tibetan court.

The earliest dateable sources for Padmasambhava would have been the inscriptions that survived uneffaced from Tibet's imperium, but these make no reference to the tantrika, even when the contributions of others from the era are commemorated. Padmasambhava is likewise absent from both the *Edict* and *Authoritative Exposition of Samyé Monastery* (*Bsam yas bka' gtsigs, Bsam yas bka' mchid*). This is especially notable in the latter since it narrates the calamities that obstructed the introduction of Buddhism and the construction of Samyé, the twin impetuses for his invitation. Admittedly, the *Authoritative Exposition* only refers to Buddhist "teachers of virtue" generically and fails to mention any by name, such that Śāntarakṣita is absent as well,[23] but the entire scope of extant epigraphic evidence, whether carved on stele or transcribed into surviving histories, offers no confirmation of Padmasambhava's presence in Tibet. Manuscripts dated to some time after the reign of Tri Songdetsen and likely after the end of the empire altogether are the only resources for early depictions of Padmasambhava.

As the empire collapsed and Tibet fragmented in the latter decades of the

21. Davidson 2005, 25–26 and 29.

22. Davidson 2005, 33.

23. Richardson 1998, 89–99.

ninth century, its texts were plundered and scattered such that very few remain extant today. While Tibetans have referred to the period between the end of the empire and the beginning of the later dissemination as "the dark period," this was due in part to the scarcity of resources available to them that could illuminate it. Only a relatively recent and remarkable discovery would provide some remedy for contemporary scholars. In addition to imperial-era inscriptions, what we now know of the empire is drawn almost exclusively from a cache of mostly tenth- and early eleventh-century Tibetan manuscripts discovered felicitously in China and subsequently hauled abroad by European scholars at the turn of the twentieth century. These were found in a former monastery cave at Magao near Dunhuang, a Silk Road town now in Gansu province, that came under the successive reigns of various powers throughout its history. Since Dunhuang was conquered by the Tibetans during Tri Songdetsen's campaign in 786, and since the Tibetan language persisted as a lingua franca in the region for some time thereafter, Tibetan documents were discovered among a diverse cache of manuscripts preserved there. These had survived untouched in a sealed cave library from the time this grotto was walled off circa 1010 to its discovery in 1900.[24]

While several manuscripts address Tri Songdetsen's reign, they are often generic, with little historical data concerning the establishment of Buddhism. the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* is one of the best resources for the history of the empire, yet it only provides a terse summary of these events:

> Seizing on the unsurpassed religion of the Buddha and practicing it, [Tri Songdetsen] built temples in the center and on all the borders. Having established the religion, everyone entered into compassion and was liberated from birth and death by calling their minds to it.[25]

Since so few of these early documents offer much detail, those that do are invaluable for gaining insight into how Buddhism was established in eighth-century Tibet. Foremost among these are fragments of a history that became known as the *Testimony of Ba* (*Dba'/Rba/Sba bzhed*) in later centuries. Whether the original elements of this autobiographical narrative stem from the time of its eighth-century narrator or shortly thereafter remains a topic of debate—it might even preserve older material from his ancestors[26]—but the

24. Dalton and van Schaik 2006, xxi; Dalton 2011, 8–10.

25. Translation following Dotson 2007, 26.

26. Kapstein (2000, 72) highlights text from the time of Tri Songdetsen's father, Tri Detsuktsen, that may be drawn from that period.

correspondence of these fragments to the earliest extant manuscripts of the complete narrative confirm the *Testimony of Ba*, or at least some textual components that became renowned as the *Testimony of Ba*, as the earliest extant narrative that details Tibet's conversion to Buddhism.[27]

As declared by its eponymous title, the *Testimony of Ba* alleges to be the first-person account of Ba Selnang Yeshé Wangpo (eighth century), one of the first seven Tibetans to be ordained as Buddhist monks and the original abbot of Samyé Monastery; thus the author claims to be a direct witness to these events. The Dunhuang fragments of this narrative only recount Śāntarakṣita's original invitation and temporary detainment in Lhasa—no mention of Padmasambhava is made whatsoever—but subsequent recensions flesh out the narrative. Following Wangdu and Diemberger's translation of the earliest extant version of the complete narrative (*Dba' bzhed*, eleventh–thirteenth centuries),[28] Śāntarakṣita recommends Padmasambhava to Tri Songdetsen:

> Once upon a time when the Transcendent Conqueror was dwelling in the world, there was no one among all the gods and *nāga* of Jambudvīpa who was not bound by the order of the Buddha. However, in this land of Tibet gods and *nāga* have escaped from control and seem to have prevented the emperor from practicing the sacred doctrine. At present nobody in Jambudvīpa possesses greater powers in the use of mantra than the master from Uḍḍiyāna called Padmasambhava. Last year calamities occurred such as the flood in Pangtang and the royal castle of Lhasa burned down, and the wicked gods and *nāga* have been hindering the emperor's practice of the doctrine. This master of mantra can perform the mirror-divination of the four great kings and make the relevant interpretation. If most of the wicked gods and *nāga* are subdued,

27. Based on their analysis of the Dunhuang fragments, van Schaik and Iwao (2008, 480) conclude that the *Testimony of Ba* is "the earliest extant Tibetan Buddhist history." Richardson (1998, 89–99) dubs the *Edict* and *Authoritative Exposition of Samyé* as the "first Tibetan *Chos 'byung*" or history of Buddhism, but these two documents offer almost nothing with regard to how Buddhism was established in Tibet. Instead, they preserve a declaration of state support in perpetuity in the former and some challenges to its establishment, a generic mention of "teachers of virtue," and a *précis* concerning religious law in the latter, but very little in the manner of detailing these events. For these reasons, van Schaik and Iwao seem justified in arguing that, given the presence of these fragments at Dunhuang, what we now know as the *Testimony of Ba* comprises the earliest extant history of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism, and these fragments certainly represent the earliest extant narration of these events in any detail.

28. Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 8.

> bound by oath, and firmly instructed, the land will become peaceful. This master of mantra is capable of enabling the sacred doctrine to be practiced in the future.[29]

After his introductory audience at court, Padmasambhava proceeds to display various feats of magic mostly associated with water.[30] Perhaps because of these abilities, he is soon deported by the emperor, who at the suggestion of his imperial advisors comes to suspect that the spiritual master is a threat to his temporal authority. Following Matthew Kapstein, however, Robert Mayer argues that the real threat embodied by Padmasambhava was his promotion of Śaiva-influenced *kāpālika* practices, the modes of transgressive tantra often subsumed under Mahāyoga tantra in Tibetan doxographies that remained controversial among eighth-century Indian Buddhists and presumably their new Tibetan patrons as well. They would become revered forms of tantric Buddhist praxis over the coming centuries, however, which would help clarify why early negative depictions of Padmasambhava and his time in Tibet, such as the one below, soon gave way to his burgeoning apotheosis.[31] Again following Wangdu and Diemberger's translation:

> The ministers reported to Tri Songdetsen: "With his great magical powers this master might seize political power," therefore the emperor grew suspicious. He suspended the master's rituals and prevented them from being celebrated. These were the rituals for subduing the gods and *nāga* that were still to be repeated twice. The emperor presented the preceptor with many offerings and said: "Revered master! You let the holy doctrine come to the country of Tibet. You have already achieved what was in my mind; you bound by oath the gods and *nāga* and so on—that is enough. It is not necessary that the sand of Ngamshö be covered with meadows and that springs appear. It is enough that there is the river called Yarkyim in my own land. Master, please return to your homeland!"
>
> Master Padmasambhava replied, "I thought that in the land of Tibet the doctrine could be established very firmly, that the whole country of Tibet could be led to virtue and that it could become a

29. Translation following Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 54.

30. Wangdu and Diemberger (2000, 13–14) bolster the case for Uḍḍiyāna as Swat in that Padmasambhava's primary thaumaturgical skillset appears to be an expertise in sophisticated irrigation technologies that were native to the area.

31. Mayer 2015b, 344, citing Kapstein 2000, 159, and Szánto 2013.

prosperous and happy land. However the emperor, being narrow-minded and greatly jealous, suspected that I might seize political power. I do not even desire universal political power, so how could I long for the political power of such a king?" When the master was leaving for India, the emperor circumambulated him three times and offered him a large quantity of gold dust in order to please him. "If I desire gold dust this is it!" He took a full sleeve of sand and this became gold dust. Still, in order to please the emperor he accepted a handful of gold dust and left for India.

After the restricted assembly had been summoned and a discussion held, it was declared, "If Padmasambhava is not killed, he will harm Tibet," so assassins were sent. While they were waiting at the gorge of Dongpam, the master said to his escort, "Someone will come to harm me tomorrow." While he was crossing the gorge of Dongpam, the archers nocked and drew their arrows. The master performed some *mudrā* and the twenty assassins were duly frozen like paintings, unable to speak and move, and he passed straight through them. Upon his arrival at the border of Mang-yul the master said, "If the gods, *nāga* and demons had been bound by oath three times, the emperor would enjoy long life, his descendants would have high political authority, the country of Tibet would avoid conflict, and the doctrine of the Buddha would flourish for a long time, so my mind is burdened with that which is still left unaccomplished. In the country of Tibet, approaching the final 500-year period of the doctrine, there will be no opposition from the non-Buddhists; instead there will be disputes among the Buddhists themselves. In the land of Tibet, there will still be a great fight."

He sent back his escort, gave them some mustard seed, and instructed them, "Give this to the people who wanted to shoot me with their arrows and they will be able to move again." As soon as they were given the mustard seed, the assassins at Dongpam who had been frozen like paintings were able to move and speak again. When the escort reported the events upon their return, the emperor felt great sorrow.[32]

So ends the earliest extant account of Padmasambhava's interaction with the Tibetan court and his role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet. Tri Songdetsen orders Padmasambhava escorted back to the border but,

32. Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 58–59.

suspecting the worst from his imbroglio with such a powerful siddha, decides it best to not leave him alive and so scrambles a team of archer-assassins to pursue him. Meeting Padmasambhava at the border with bows drawn, the archers are paralyzed by his mystical gesture, and he safely passes back to Nepal, lamenting that later Tibetan Buddhists would descend into conflict and the Dharma would not last long. Having been quickly deported by imperial decree, Padmasambhava does not complete the rituals required to stabilize Buddhism in Tibet, does not consecrate Samyé Monastery, does not conceal a single treasure, and does not magnetize a retinue of core disciples for the transmission of the esoteric instructions. According to the *Testimony of Ba* account, it is unclear whether he ever taught Buddhism in Tibet. Robert Mayer suspects that Padmasambhava's deportation in the *Testimony of Ba* is a narrative consequence of imperial decrees, some of which are preserved in the *Two Volumes on Translation* (*Sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa*), a manual (among other functions) for translating Sanskrit into Tibetan, completed in 814, that proscribes the translation and distribution of antinomian tantras in the decades after Tri Songdetsen's reign. Padmasambhava's invitation represents a rather brief trial period for these tantras in Tibet, though perhaps the terms of his employ as envisioned by Śāntarakṣita only required the ritual subjugation of obstructing forces rather than doctrinal instruction in Buddhist soteriology. The revocation of Padmasambhava's welcome, whether mythical or historical, may be considered a casualty of Tibet's failed experiment with the transgressive tantras of the day. As these tantras gained widespread popularity in subsequent centuries, Padmasambhava's original association with them necessitated his rehabilitation and re-membering as is forwarded by his hagiographies.[33]

Padmasambhava is cast only as a tangential figure in the *Testimony of Ba* rather than as its protagonist, a chance contributor perhaps but not the catalyst primarily responsible for Tibet's conversion and certainly not the Second Buddha. Given the inherently subjective nature of historical writing, the alleged author and narrator Ba Selnang Yeshé Wangpo seems to promote his own role as the ordained protagonist, so perhaps that of the foreign tantrika Padmasambhava was reciprocally diminished.[34] The wholesale omission of a key figure from benchmark events such as the consecration of Samyé would require a far more significant manipulation of the remaining narrative, however, and the

33. Robert Mayer, personal communication, March 9, 2015. Also see Mayer 2015a, 392, citing Ishikawa 1990, 4.

34. Uray (1968) emphasizes that an objective of many early Tibetan histories is to vaunt specific clans, so certain details counter to that purpose were likely omitted. For similar concerns regarding the *Testimony of Ba* in particular, see van der Kuijp 2013b, 162–63.

anxieties that inspired Padmasambhava's deportation retain a rather convincing plausibility. Tri Songdetsen's gradual introduction of Buddhism was no doubt intended to bolster his rule, but Padmasambhava's unique abilities and the awe they inspired could undermine the emperor's claim to singular authority, so deporting and perhaps even assassinating the tantrika may have seemed like a cogent course of action. Besides, Padmasambhava had already completed his original commission by subduing those who had instigated several calamities before, and the construction of Samyé could now progress unimpeded with or without his skill set. However the person of Padmasambhava is represented and perhaps manipulated within the *Testimony of Ba*, the fact remains that not a single early source corroborates his seminal role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet. This is part of what makes its counternarratives in the treasure literature so intriguing.

Several early references to Padmasambhava remain scattered among the manuscripts recovered near Dunhuang, but unlike the *Testimony of Ba* that contradicts so much of the later treasure accounts, they preserve numerous precedents for the character traits that would come to define Padmasambhava in later centuries. These manuscripts have been dated from the middle of the tenth century to the early eleventh century, though some were certainly sourced from "archetypal ancestors" or earlier materials. This being the case, some of their details could stem from the same era that Padmasambhava is said to have visited Tibet.[35] Other manuscripts may be tenth- or eleventh-century originals, but all mentions of Padmasambhava prior to Nyangrel are useful for tracing his apotheosis from a minor historical personage of ordinary human descent to the enlightened font of the most esoteric instructions.[36] Ranging from passing references in a list to brief narratives featuring him as a protagonist, these various details and episodic threads provide the only insights into the early development of his biographical tradition while revealing that much of who he became has its roots in this era that followed the collapse of the empire.

Given that the translation of the *Testimony of Ba* reproduced above represents a later exemplar, and that its Dunhuang fragments preserve no mention of Padmasambhava, its portrayal of his person and time in Tibet cannot be verified as authentically ancient. However, a well-studied depiction is preserved within a late tenth-century Dunhuang manuscript that details his mastery and

35. Cantwell and Mayer (2013, 24 and n12) argue that their critical edition of the *Noble Noose of Methods* reveals that the Dunhuang manuscript had at least two copyings prior to it. In a separate article, Mayer (2013a) explicitly clarifies the possibility of such a provenance.

36. Cantwell and Mayer 2013, 25.

transmission of the meditational deity Vajrakīla at Yangleshö in Nepal (near modern-day Pharping in the southwestern foothills of the Kathmandu Valley). Following Matthew Kapstein's translation:

> At first there was the journey from Yangleshö in Nepal to the temple of Nālandā in India in order to fetch the *Hundred Thousand Verse Tantra of Vajrakīla* (*Phur bu'i 'bum sde*): When the Nepali porters Śākyapur and Iso were hired and sent off, there was a tetrad of *sé* goddesses who, at about nightfall, killed everyone and stole their breath. Padmasambhava became short-tempered, made as if to steal their breath, and caught them as they were wondering where to flee. Then he put them in his hat and departed. Arriving at Nālandā, he opened his hat and an exceedingly pretty woman appeared in the flesh. When she vowed to be a protectress for the practice of Kīla, he empowered her as its protectress. Because the prognostications were fine, he laughed, offered up a whole handful of gold dust, and then brought forth the *Hundred Thousand Verse Tantra of Vajrakīla*. After arriving at Yangleshö in Nepal with it, he performed the practices belonging to all the classes of yoga from the general kriyā up through atiyoga. For the purposes of all the vehicles, he proclaimed each and every transmission of Kīla from the *Hundred Thousand Verse Tantra of Vajrakīla*, as is affirmed in all the secret tantras.
>
> In that way, having definitively established the transmissions concerning attainment, and having again escorted the *Hundred Thousand* back to Nepal, Master Sambhava then performed the rites of attainment in the Asura cave with the Newari Serpo, Indrashuguta, Prabesé, and others. And thus he performed the rites, impelling the four *sé* goddesses whose embodied forms had not passed away. He named them Great Sorceress of Outer Splendor, Miraculous Nourisher, Great Witch Bestowing Glory, and Life-Granting Conjuress. Having performed the great attainment for seven days, he manifestly beheld the visage of Vajrakumāra [an epithet of Vajrakīla].
>
> Having acquired the accomplishment of Kīla, concerning his attainment of the signs, Padmasambhava, having set a limitless forest ablaze, thrust the kīla at the flames. Śrīgupta, having struck it at the rock in the region of the frontier forest of India, broke the rock into four fragments and thus "thrust it at stone." The Newari Serpo thrust it at water and so reversed the water's course, thereby establishing Nepal itself as a mercantile center. Such were the miraculous abilities and powers that arose.

> In Tibet Master Sambhava explained it to Pagor Vairocana and Tsé Jñānasukha. Later Dré Tathāgata and Buna Ana heard it and practiced at the cave of Samyé Rock at Drakmar. Dré Tathāgata thrust it at fire. Buna thrust it at the Rock of Hepo. Then the glory of the Kīla came to Chim Śākya and Nanam Zhang Dorjé Nyen. Then it was explained to Jin Yeshé Tsek.
>
> The trio of Yeshé Tsek, Nyen Nyiwa Tsenbapel, and Demen Gyaltsen successfully practiced at Nyengong in Lhodrak. The Preceptor thrust the kīla, having set the rock of Bumthang ablaze . . .[37]

This brief episode already preserves several features that would come to define Padmasambhava throughout the later hagiographical literature. A special affinity for the practice of the deity Vajrakīla, his retreat at Yangleshö, the ritual subjugation of demigods, and his scattering of gold dust all become topoi of his core narrative.[38] Of particular significance to the present study is Padmasambhava's transmission of the Vajrakīla cycle to several disciples in the corridor from Bumthang in Bhutan to Lhodrak in southern Tibet, which was the exact range of Nyangrel's activities. Nyangrel was born, recovered most of his treasures, and established his hermitage in this area. Given the approximation of local geography, it seems appropriate to surmise that the author of this Vajrakīla text names sites that were familiar to him, thus it is not at all coincidental that Nyangrel was the first to introduce a complete hagiography of Padmasambhava: some of the earliest Padmasambhava lore apparently developed and circulated right in his neighborhood.

Another potentially early resource for Padmasambhava is among the very few non-treasure texts explicitly ascribed to him, *An Esoteric Instruction: The Garland of Views* (*Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*). Its early provenance has been attested by Samten Karmay and subsequent scholars via various modes of analysis and argumentation,[39] and its attribution to Padmasambhava seems at least somewhat viable, though it may simply reflect the spread of his mythology and the teachings associated with him.[40] Featuring an early version of

37. Pelliot tibétaine 44. Translation following Kapstein 2000, 158. For other studies and translations, see Bischoff and Hartman 1971; Takeuchi 2004; Cantwell and Mayer 2008a, 41–60; Akagi 2011; and a summary of all in Cantwell and Mayer 2013, 32n25.

38. See Kapstein 2000, 159 and 265n110; Dalton 2004, 762.

39. Dorje 1987, 69; Karmay 1988, 142–44; Davidson 2005, 153.

40. A prominent example with regard to the *Garland of Views* is its citation in only the later recensions of the *Testimony of Ba. Sba bzhed* S, 32; translated in Kapstein 2000, 157. Padmasambhava departs before bestowing any Dharma instructions in the earlier recension, *Dba' bzhed*.

the nine-vehicle doxography, the *Garland of Views* presents an early elucidation of the Great Perfection as a distinct category of soteriological theory and praxis, which is driven by the author's quotation of and commentary on several verses from the thirteenth chapter of the *Tantra of the Secret Quintessence* (*Rgyud gsang ba snying po, Guhyagarbhatantra*). While this seminal Nyingma mahāyoga tantra came under attack in subsequent centuries for the overtly sexual and ultraviolent rhetoric featured in some sections, the subsequent discovery of Sanskrit editions at Samyé and in Kathmandu silenced challenges to its Indic pedigree.[41] Such concerns for the continuity of Indic lineages implies a subtext of critique for the new and indigenous, and these verifications legitimated the *Tantra of the Secret Quintessence* and its attendant commentaries as well, even if some Tibetans would retain an ambivalence toward its content for centuries.[42] As further evidence of its antiquity, the *Garland of Views* and its attribution to Padmasambhava is cited in *Lamp for the Eye of Concentration* (*Bsam gten mig sgron*) by Nup Sangyé Yeshé (mid-ninth to mid-tenth centuries). If this latter text can indeed be attributed to its purported author, then it is possible that the source text and its attribution to Padmasambhava originated not long after his stay in Tibet.

Other early sources make fleeting mentions of Padmasambhava where he is described as the subjugator of seven *sinmo* demonesses, as the translator of a single treatise by Śāntarakṣita in the Tibetan canon, among the foreign scholars listed in the *Pangthangma* catalog (*Dkar chag 'pang thang ma*) of translations, and in a stanza of praise from another Dunhuang text attributed to Padmasambhava, *A Noble Noose of Methods*, that Nyangrel copied verbatim into the *Copper Island*.[43] As detailed in publications by Matthew Kapstein, Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, and Jacob Dalton, even at this earliest stage of textual evidence concerning the Padmasambhava story, there is a rather remarkable degree of harmonization or consistency among the threads of his biography, many of which persisted for Nyangrel to gather under a single title. How he accomplished this is the primary inquiry of this book, which is driven by an investigation of Nyangrel himself.

41. For a complete translation, transcription, and analysis of *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*, see Karmay 1988, 137–74. Thubten Jinpa's translation can be downloaded from tibetanclassics.org.

42. See Karmay 1998, 6–13.

43. Respectively, see Dalton 2004, 765, Tucci 1949, 88, and Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 92–94.

Lives and Times of the Dreadlocked Sovereign

Given that the emperors are said to have descended from the heavens, it is ironic to state that the collapse of the Tibetan empire was a godsend for Tibetan Buddhism, but in the light of retrospection it may be argued that this is precisely the case. The emperors sponsored and coordinated the translation of Indian Buddhist literature into Tibetan, a feat counted among the greatest translation endeavors ever accomplished in the history of the world,[44] yet with the collapse of Tibet's centralized administration, the erosion of its Buddhist institutions, and the plundering of its coffers, the flow of Indian teachers ebbed for a time, and the regulations imposed on the translation of Buddhist texts by the last Buddhist emperors dissolved, especially with regard to the translation of the tantras. Unchecked by such authorities during the subsequent "age of fragmentation," Buddhism in Tibet was free to become Tibetan Buddhism, one developed by the needs and interests of Tibetan Buddhists rather than one dictated by Indic precedent and imperial decree. In particular, the antinomian tendencies and esoteric technologies of some Buddhist tantras led to their ban under the emperors, but as can be the case with illicit products, the law seems to belie their popular demand. Translations of these Indian tantras spread throughout Tibet after the imperium but so did apocryphal mimicries and uniquely Tibetan syntheses such as the Great Perfection. As necessary steps in the process of indigenization, cultural preferences and creative ingenuity helped transform the foreign import of Indian Buddhist discourse and praxis into a genuinely Tibetan Buddhism.

The inception of a Tibetan renaissance in the late tenth century was initiated in part by a neoconservative backlash to the widespread propagation of tantric products that, regardless of origin, were uniformly presented as translations bequeathed as Tibet's imperial inheritance.[45] In order to distinguish authentic Indian source texts from Tibetan apocrypha, reintroduce conventional Buddhist ethics, revitalize institutional Buddhism, and establish a new orthodoxy, Indian masters were once again invited to Tibet by feudal rulers who sought to model themselves on the emperors of old. This resulted in the influx of contemporary esoteric Buddhist scriptures whose origins could at least be verified by Sanskrit originals, even if their Indic composition was orig-

44. Kapstein 2006, 72.

45. Davidson (2005, 20–21) is careful to define this period as "a" renaissance rather than "the" Renaissance. He describes the rise of Tibet's neocons, the competition between Nyingma and Sarma scriptures, and the production of "gray texts" in response to burgeoning Tibetan demand in the eleventh century (Davidson 2005, 148–51).

inal as well. Whether translated during the imperium or developed in the process of indigenization thereafter, the transmissions that traced their origins to the empire and the period that immediately followed it were in competition with a wave of new translations (*gsar 'gyur*) that formed the basis of new sects and monastic centers. This competition defined this renaissance period of Tibetan Buddhism, especially for those designated as proponents of the "old school of the early translations" (*snga 'gyur rnying ma*).

So it was that in 1124 Ngadak Nyangrel Nyima Öser was born into a dynamic religious context amid the tumult of widespread political instability. By his time several imperial-era clans had reasserted their influence and authority through consolidating power and patronizing Buddhism once again. While Nyangrel hailed from the imperial Nyang clan (archaic: Myang) and proudly maintained its tantric transmissions, by his time his immediate family lived under modest circumstances and limited prestige. Such diminished status was in stark contrast to when, as one of Tibet's Buddhist aristocratic families, the Nyang clan populated the inner circles of the emperors for generations, rising to prominence and prosperity in lockstep with the Buddhist empire. As evidenced by their ancient tombs, the Nyang clan hailed from the region that still shares their name to the west of Lhasa.[46] The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* records that the sixth-century emperor Namri Löntsen rewarded the Nyang clan with estates and vassals for their role in delivering him into power, and that two clan representatives were henceforth "attached to the emperor's side" as well as the court.[47] While one influential ancestor was purged during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, a ninth-century stele commemorates the service of Nyang Tingezin (ca. 760–ca. 815) to the emperor Tri Desongtsen (r. ca. 798–ca. 800 and ca. 802–ca. 815), who rewards him with lands to the east of Lhasa.[48]

Nyangrel's father, Nyangtön Chökyi Khorlo, settled with a small retinue of disciples far from those areas into a much quieter life in Lhodrak, southern Tibet, quite far from the eponymous lands of their ancestors and safely

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The indigenous composition of tantras was not always automatically problematic and delegitimizing, but Indic precedent eventually became the primary means of scriptural authentication during the renaissance and thereafter. Rongzom Chökyi Sangpo (1012–88) defended Tibetan scriptural compositions by equating accomplished authors with the Buddha himself and suggested that doubting the authenticity of their tantras carried the same severe karmic consequences as doubting the Buddha's own scriptures. See Wangchuk 2002, 282–85.

46. For a survey of the Nyang region and its imperial-era Nyang-clan tombs, see Hazod in Dotson 2009, 178–80.

47. Beckwith 1977, *Old Tibetan Chronicle* 19–23, transcribed on 189–90, translated on 207–8.

48. Richardson 1985, 43–45; also see Scherrer-Schaub 2002, 265. For clarification on the reigns after the abdication of Tri Songdetsen, see Dotson 2007.

distanced from the recurrent battles that ravaged the old symbols of power to the north. Due to a dispute between at least two resurgent Buddhist communities, the circumambulatory path and several temples of Samyé Monastery were set to the torch in 1106, less than twenty years before Nyangrel was born, and the Jokhang temple in Lhasa burned to the ground under similar circumstances in 1160. Such events fulfill Padmasambhava's parting prophecy in the *Testimony of Ba* (perhaps serving as further evidence of its interpolation during this period), where he laments that instead of "opposition from the non-Buddhists, there will be disputes among the Buddhists themselves," and "in the country of Tibet there will still be a great fight."[49] A dramatic depiction is recorded by one of Nyangrel's contemporaries, Lama Shang (1122–93), who recounts the arrival of his guru, Gomtsul, at the tragic scene after the arson of the Jokhang, Tibet's most sacred shrine:

> All of the members of the religious community were fighting. As when a lion's insides are eaten by worms, the Jokhang was destroyed from within . . . Nothing remained but ruins and smoke . . . When Gomtsul arrived at the ruins of the temple, there were tears in the eyes of the Jowo Śākyamuni statue. Light rays issued from its heart and dissolved into the teacher's heart.[50]

Given that the area had descended into factional violence and total anarchy such that not even the Jowo was safe, Gomtsul entrusted the taming of Lhasa and its environs to his disciple, Lama Shang, who soon took up the task with great gusto. In addition to his deployment of martial thaumaturgy to sway battles in his favor, Lama Shang exerted his will throughout the region by conscripting monks to serve several martial functions: soldiers who marched against those who opposed him, peacekeepers between warring factions, armed escorts for merchants and pilgrims on the roadways of central Tibet, and enforcers for the rule of law that he imposed throughout the region. Among other signs of Lama Shang's success in these endeavors, in 1175 and 1187 he built two major monastic institutions as citadels and barracks at strategic locations outside the city,[51] recognizing that the conflicts in Lhasa necessitated such fortifications through the end of the twelfth century. This was too late for Nyangrel, however, as his limited peregrinations in search of the

49. Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 59.

50. Translation following Yamamoto 2009, 87.

51. On the deployment of martial monks, see Yamamoto 2009, 214 and 216; on the construction of these two monasteries, see Yamamoto 2009, 89.

treasures seem to have concluded before Lama Shang's intervention bore fruit, and he settled into his hermitage safely insulated from the instability that persisted north of the Tamshöl gorge throughout most of his life.

Whereas Nyangrel's biographies only hint at the disorder of his era, noting his struggles with hunger and a demand for his performance of fierce rites for hire, he embeds a vivid prophecy for the time of treasure recovery in the *Copper Island*. Across the spectrum of later sources such as treasure materials, "prophecies" by eighth-century figures such as Padmasambhava most often describe the era of their authorship or interpolation rather than that of their alleged prophesizers. While this prophecy in the *Copper Island* defines both the destined treasure revealer and the circumstances he would awaken within, they may be Nyangrel's most direct reflections on himself and his twelfth-century climate. According to the earliest recension of the text, with regard to the character of Tri Songdetsen's treasure-revealing reincarnation (i.e., Nyangrel), Padmasambhava attests:

> Vigorously exerting himself in great discriminative awareness and compassion, he will have pure samaya and little mental agitation. He will be vast and quiet. He will not cast praise and blame toward others in his peaceful mind. He will be of swift intelligence and continuously attentive. He will be fair-skinned and good-natured. Being born as such a person, once the king himself comes to possess all the instructions I have given now, he will sever the continuity [of karma and rebirth] by means of that life.[52]

Later recensions accrue additional compliments; there can be no doubt that the text was manipulated. However much of this can be attributed to Nyangrel, the choices here highlight those personal qualities that Nyangrel would have found most positive in himself, which are uniformly laudatory and somewhat generic. More illuminating is the description of Nyangrel's era:

> Concerning the time when the treasures will emerge, people will eat spoiled food and dung. They will suppress the wheel of doctrine and destroy the hermitages. They will sell religious instructions as commodities and count the dead by the thousands. Donning coarse

52. Translation following the earliest extant recensions as preserved in *Zangs gling ma* H, 82b5–83a3, and *Me tog snying po* M, 256.3.4–257.1.1; K, 354.21–355.5. For the latest recension, cf. *Zangs gling ma* A, 138.4–139.1 and its translation in Kunsang 1993, 139.

garments of goat hair, they will quarrel with family and wear iron mail into action.

Venerable elders will act as army generals, and monks will take up swords. Fortifications will be erected at sacred sites, and solitary retreats will be built as citadels in the center of towns. Practitioners of mantra will use dorjés to inflict injury in battle and lace foul food with poison. Warriors will take aim with catapults. Easterners will take up bows. Leaders will renege on their promises of safe passage. Tibet will descend into chaos like a hundred fragmented pieces of armor. Fathers and sons will argue. Siblings and parents will quarrel. Malevolent entities such as *tsen* and *nöchin* will summon warrior spirits. Bandits will conquer and control the treacherous roads.

At that time ghosts and *gongpo* demons will enter the hearts of all. *Tedrang* ghosts will enter the hearts of children. *Senmo* will enter the hearts of women. By provoking all the eight classes of gods and demons of appearance and existence, disease, famine, and a turbulent age will ensue. At that time the three inabilities will occur:

1. The earth will not be able to hold precious treasures, so doctrinal and wealth treasures will come forth.
2. The Dharma protectors will not be able to guard the caches of precious gold and silver entrusted to them, so the sangha's wealth will be stolen.
3. Dharma practitioners will not be able to practice sādhanas, so each will sell the profound instructions as merchandise to unaccomplished individuals, and they will wish to explain to individuals that which they have not understood and in which they have no experience.[53]

Apparently the situation was quite dire in twelfth-century Tibet. While it may be tempting to read this prophecy as relying on the flourish of hyperbole, there is little reason to doubt that it could accurately record Nyangrel's view of the unstable time in which he lived. It depicts a period of decentralized administration, lawlessness, anarchy, poverty, violence, and the denigration of the Buddhist teachings, all of which is corroborated by Lama Shang's detailed

53. Translation based on its earliest recension in *Me tog snying po* M, 256.2.4–256.3.2 and *Zangs gling ma* H, 81b.4–82b.3. Cf. its latest recension as translated by Kunsang 1993, 138–39, and Davidson 2005, 214. An excerpt that clearly parallels much of its form and context is found in *Maṇi bka' 'bum*, 1:192–93, translated in Kapstein 2000, 150.

accounts of the period.[54] There is a consensus among sources that it indeed was a time when authoritative religious figures like Lama Shang became military leaders commanding armies of monk-combatants, and mantrins—including Nyangrel himself, according to his biographies—profited from the performance of apotropaic and martial rituals in response to surging demand from a nervous populace threatened by countless dangers.[55]

As specified in the set of three inabilities, all of this signifies the descent of an especially degenerate age where the Three Jewels are threatened at three distinct levels, beginning with the fundamental ground of Tibet itself. Just as Padmasambhava inters all the treasures to subjugate and consecrate Tibet as a land of Dharma in the *Copper Island*, the rampant negativity of this era so inverts his original intent—the earth, demigods, and people are so poisoned, perverse, and corrupted—that the soil will purge itself of all that is enriching, proper, and immaculate. Being omniscient and practically omnipotent, this must all be part of Padmasambhava's master plan, however, and these most infelicitous occurrences are simultaneously auspicious, because that purging results in the treasures' ascent for recovery, their emergence as salvific interventions for a tumultuous age. Even the Dharma protectors are rendered impotent, helpless to uphold their sworn oaths to protect the sangha and its resources, and esoteric instructions are bartered in the streets by the unscrupulous and unrealized. Such dangerous and endarkened circumstances help explain why Nyangrel elected to operate within a circumscribed area throughout his life, rarely venturing beyond it.

According to both of his biographies, Nyangrel lived his life sheltered within a long gorge cut by the Tamshöl River, and he built his Mawochok hermitage in a relatively desolate, unclaimed adjacency beyond the interest of whatever powers were in the vicinity. His biographies do not record any interactions or exchanges with local political entities or patrons, and except for a mysterious nun who greets him and points out the geomantic features of the site, Nyangrel stakes his claim to Mawochok alone and uncontested.

While paths along the Tamshöl served as a pilgrimage route from central Tibet to Bhutan, it seems that it was a relatively quiet zone safely removed from the conflicts to the north, and Nyangrel limited his explorations almost exclusively to this area (see plate 2). Such a narrow range of activity may very well reflect a pronounced concern with travel farther abroad. His biographies never mention a pilgrimage to Lhasa, perhaps because of the risks incurred on those prominent routes, never mind the conflicts endemic to the valley

54. See Kapstein 2000, 264n63.

55. *Gsal ba'i me long*, 331.

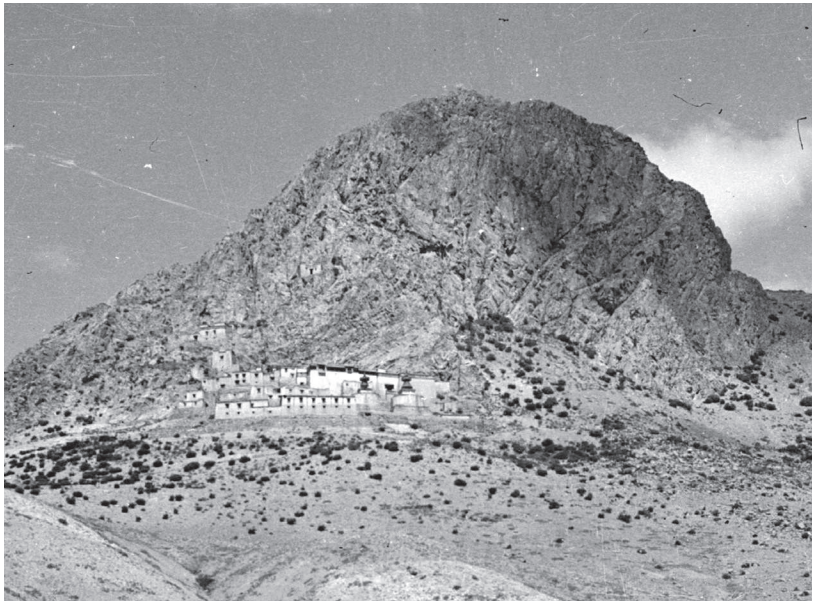

Figure 1. Mawochok hermitage prior to the Cultural Revolution, fronted by the massive reliquaries of Nyangrel and Namkhapel. "Mawochok Monastery in the Lhodrak region," photograph by Hugh E. Richardson, 1950 (detail). Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 2001.59.4.17.1.

itself; nor do they describe him as venturing farther north than Samyé Monastery or farther south than Bumthang in search of treasures. These mark the most distant poles of Nyangrel's recorded wanderings, but the densest cluster of Nyangrel's treasure caches were secured within the Tamshöl corridor. Despite such modest environs, Nyangrel conceived a far more significant role for himself based as much on the circumstances of his present as the unique insights he envisioned of Tibet's past.

Paralleling the life of the Buddha, Nyangrel's biographies record that from the moment of conception, his parents experienced dreams and signs that confirmed their child as a *tulku* (*sprul sku*, *nirmāṇakāya*) or magically emanated reincarnation. Being tantric adepts themselves, perhaps they encouraged their son to recognize such qualities within himself, and he is said to have recalled his "preincarnations" by the age of ten. Additional recollections result in the sequencing of an exact catenate or unbroken series of lives beginning with none other than emperor Tri Songdetsen himself. Of all of his preincarnations, the emperor is uniquely consequential for Nyangrel, for it is within that life that the karmic seeds were planted both for his enlightenment and for the

enlightened activity by which he would become renowned: treasure recovery. Given the turbulence of central Tibet since the collapse of the empire, there was a popular nostalgia for the imperial era defined by centralized authority, safety, prosperity, and glory. While the feudal lords sought to mimic the emperors by sponsoring Buddhism and regaining some semblance of the old imperium within their limited dominion, no evidence suggests that Nyangrel held any such political aspirations. For him this nostalgia manifests as the direct memory of empire in personal recollections of his previous life as Tri Songdetsen. While this is a consistently defining feature throughout both of his biographies, and while these recollections form the legitimating basis of his life's work as a treasure revealer, this claim must be accompanied by a degree of skepticism, given the antiquity of the texts and the clear evidence of their manipulation. It is impossible to know whether Nyangrel had these experiences, whether he orally recounted or invented their occurrence as recorded in his biographies, or whether he, like Padmasambhava, is so much an amalgamation of later authors that the person is lost to time—but such can be said of any historical figure. If we are to assert anything about the historical person, Nyangrel, it is that he relied on the conviction of his past life as Tri Songdetsen to recover the treasures.

When discussing the *jātaka* or past lives of the Buddha, Donald Lopez is quite right in underscoring that "our task is not to account for its fact but for its fiction and its function," its literary construction and diverse modes of application. These are two foci at the center of the present inquiry as well, but in Nyangrel's case it is more difficult to summarily dismiss his recollections "not as a case of memory but as the mythology of memory."[56] While we will see that Nyangrel's preincarnation list and its narratives also evolved with the help of many hands, his *Copper Island* is in many respects a vehicle for the prophecy concerning Tri Songdetsen's eventual reincarnation as an enlightened treasure revealer. Moreover, Nyangrel's status as the reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen is the most repeated claim throughout both biographies where his first-person accounts repeatedly suggest that he remembered his life as Tri Songdetsen in the eighth century in the exact same way that he remembered the details of his present life in the twelfth.

Memory itself is a peculiar form of thought. Discursively articulated by worded commentary and perfumed with emotion, the phantoms and echoes of direct perceptual experience are taken to be accurately representative of the past. While necessarily limited and subjective as a basis, memory can be confirmed, denied, or confused by consensus so long as there are others who

56. Lopez 1992, 24.

claim witness to the same events. Being nearly four centuries removed from the imperium, Nyangrel's claim circumvents this possibility and elevates his perspective as virtually unchallengeable—unless he meets another who claims both reincarnate descent from the empire and clear memories of it. His biographies report that Nyangrel met at least one other individual with a similar degree of realization and insight into an imperial-era preincarnation, in this case the translator Vairocana, but this person's primary function within the account is to corroborate Nyangrel's status as the reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen. Inhabiting such a position of mnemonic authority, Nyangrel not only gained exalted status as an enlightened, magically emanated reincarnation, but I suspect he also seized a unique form of editorial license in his revision of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism. He claims to be—and seems to believe himself to have been—a direct witness to those events as a personal disciple of Padmasambhava. Attempting to psychologize a twelfth-century Tibetan would inevitably devolve into tautology, whether cynical or apologetic, and provide more insight into the present analyst than the patient. Alternatively, it may be argued that these memories are the inventions and interjections of Nyangrel's biographers and subsequent interpolators in the transmission of their documents: adepts tracing the catenate sequence of their preincarnations becomes one of the most recurrent and definitive tropes of Tibetan biographical writing, but we shall see in chapter 2 that Nyangrel's articulation of catenate reincarnation was both revolutionary and rudimentary, thereby lending credence to the assertion that his claim preceded its normalization in literature. With so limited an array of exemplars for textual criticism and comparative analysis, a degree of skepticism remains necessary: it cannot be proven with total certainty that Nyangrel was the architect of his construction as depicted in his biographies. Nevertheless, the evidence we do have suggests that Nyangrel remembered his past lives, and that these memories were fact for Nyangrel and not fiction.

There are therefore two aspects of memory to be explored in this volume: Nyangrel's individual memory of his past and its representations, which include his past life as Tri Songdetsen; and the collective memory of the Tibetan people, Nyangrel included, that centers on the role of Padmasambhava in Tibet's conversion to Buddhism. I will argue that Nyangrel's personal recollections of his past life as Tri Songdetsen represent the culmination of a popular nostalgia for the stability and glory of the Tibetan empire in the twelfth century, and that it was the confluence of this acutely personal inspiration with a broader social yearning for the resurgence of Tibet's golden age that enabled Nyangrel to revise the historical record of the Tibetan people.

Tradition, Text, Traditional Texts, and Textual Traditions

The garuḍa eagle has a long and complex mythology. In the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*, the garuḍa independently fights free from its egg and bursts into flame, scorching space to the extent that the gods mistake it for Agni, the god of fire.[57] This depiction of the garuḍa later fused with indigenous Tibetan conceptions of a mythical bird with similar characteristics: associated with the element of fire, the *khyung* or *khanding* (*khyung, mkha' lding*) eagle is born completely formed and ready to fly upon its first breath.[58] The garuḍa may thus serve as an apt metaphor for tradition in a religious context, which is often presented as timeless, synchronic, perfect, and fully developed from the moment of inception, thereby obscuring the diachronic processes of its development.

Any tradition takes time to become resolved and refined into normative consistency: it is in fact a dynamic, ever-changing product defined by creativity, trial and error, critique, and apologetic defenses of it. From a contemporary critical perspective, the construction of tradition may be seen as an eminently human process rather than a miraculous and spontaneous emergence from the divine, which is one reason why its diachronic traces are so often excised from origin narratives. By its synchronic form, tradition may reflect something of the perfected and the eternal; it serves as a simulacrum, a manifestation of the divine in the world. This function is necessary, especially in religions such as Tibetan Buddhism that place a high value on the soteriological potential of faith. One well-known Tibetan parable is that of the old woman who asks her merchant son to return from India with a relic of the Buddha. Having been immersed in business, he only remembers his mother's request upon nearing home, so he extracts a tooth from the jaw of a dead dog, wraps it in silk, and presents it to his mother. She places the tooth on her shrine, reveres it as an authentic relic, and thereby attains enlightenment.[59] Thus in a Tibetan Buddhist context the authenticity of the object is ultimately irrelevant. While relics are certainly attested to be imbued with special properties, only faith can fully actualize that potential: without it a tooth remains a tooth. Tradition constructs itself as an orthodoxy by which these properties and potentialities are authoritatively identified, defined, and resolved as real, which establishes a foundation for faith and, in Buddhist contexts, for enlightenment itself.

Since Tibetan Buddhism is founded on the Mahāyāna ideal to benefit

57. Van Buitenen 1973, 78.

58. See Dowman 1973, 52–54. For additional details on garuḍa, see Cantwell and Mayer 2015, 161–62.

59. For one version of this parable, see Patrul 2011, 173–74.

beings, those who aspire to it may implement a full array of skillful means in pursuit of that ideal. Actions that would be considered negative in an ordinary context, from simple prevarications to the production of elaborate apocrypha, may be necessary to effect benefit. Needless to say, it can be quite difficult to discern selfless agents from those contaminated by self-interest when their actions appear identical to the observer, and there are many emic rationales for synchronic presentations of tradition and the selective refinement of texts over time that is required to present them as such. These need not be problematic from a critical perspective either, unless analysis allows a blaze of resolved synchrony to obscure the diachronic process of development itself. A major objective of the present study is to reassess three core elements of Tibetan Buddhism that have been obscured by their later traditions: catenate reincarnation, treasure recovery, and the Padmasambhava narrative. In relying on Nyangrel and his textual production as a case study, it becomes possible to destabilize normative assumptions of synchrony, whether traditional or critical, with regard to these three elements by demonstrating that normative presentations are only the most recent and refined examples of them.

While there have been many studies on various aspects of the Tibetan treasures, the convenient rubrics and resolved definitions of later traditions have too often come to define nearly a millennium of treasure recovery in Tibet.[60] According to more normative syntheses compiled by the eighteenth century, the treasures signify texts and relics that were concealed by Padmasambhava to be recovered by the reincarnations of his disciples in the centuries thereafter. The tripartite rubric of earth treasures (*sa gter*), exalted-mind treasures (*dgongs gter*), and pure vision teachings (*dag snang*) eventually became the standard typology, though downloading immaterial exalted-mind treasures from the expanse of enlightened awareness became the preferred and most popular method of revelation. The earliest iterations of the Buddhist treasures bear little resemblance to the normative treasure tradition they would become, however, and Foucault's deconstruction of tradition is precisely relevant to the task at hand:

> These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of

60. Davidson (2005, 213, and 2006, 125) was the first to raise these concerns.

> a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized.[61]

Not since the first publications on the treasures in the nineteenth century has scholarship simply accepted these normative syntheses, but a late twentieth-century drive to advance the conversation beyond the question of in/authenticity inadvertently resulted in a reification of the treasure tradition that emerged concurrently with the critical deconstruction of it. The justifications or legitimation strategies of normative treasure traditions were indeed scrutinized, which was necessary and fruitful by providing far greater insight into their construction, but this focus has resulted in a tranquility like Foucault forewarned, whereby normative treasure rubrics have become normative in more general scholarship concerning the treasures as well. That the treasures are presented as synchronic by representatives of the tradition is expected, but the adoption of that presentation in scholarship has resulted in the superimposition of very late syntheses and rubrics onto the practices that preceded them, thereby obscuring the diachronic process by which the treasures *became* a tradition. As Foucault suggests, tradition by no means needs to be rejected entirely: it serves important functions, and in this case the progression of the academic conversation beyond in/authenticity was quite skillful precisely because it allowed the treasures to remain cohesive as an object of analysis, "in suspense" and appreciated for its literary and cultural contributions.

On the other hand, Foucault recommends caution in allowing that there is even "a tradition" to be found. This critical point is well taken, and all the more so in a Buddhist context, where all conceptual designations are empty of real existence and negated by analysis, yet both perspectives agree that such conventions remain useful as rhetorical conveniences, as relative truths rather than observable realities. In this respect I will introduce a terminological dichotomy to differentiate two artificial but nevertheless useful poles: the treasures before tradition and the normative tradition of the treasures. The former concludes with the first formal attempt at their codification in the thirteenth century, which is the focal range of the present inquiry; the latter begins by the eighteenth century when a relatively high degree of consistency pervades what has been commonly identified as "the treasure tradition." Again, the mention of a treasure tradition is not meant to suggest that a single, unified entity ever existed on the ground, but it does recognize a certain degree of consistency, coherence, and general agreement exemplified by normative treasure recovery practices and rubrics. Through analyzing the biographies and recov-

61. Foucault 1972, 25.

eries of Nyangrel in particular, it becomes clear that he would identify few correlates between his modes of textual production and the array of rubrics and definitions that would come to define treasure revelation in subsequent centuries. A similar caution must be applied when approaching other elements of Tibetan Buddhism that are now normative if not definitive. Recollection of prior incarnations and catenate reincarnation had yet to become standardized and ubiquitous tropes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; rather, this represents a critical period in their development as such, so we must again proceed carefully to undermine the reflexive imputation of now familiar claims and concepts on literature that preceded their widespread popularization.

The philological analysis of Tibetan literature is both complicated and elucidated by the rather amazing fluidity of its textual reproduction and publication practices. Books are deeply venerated in Tibet, and scriptures are considered sacred relics, yet Tibetans over the centuries have displayed an equal enthusiasm for altering them! Aside from updating orthography as well as introducing new spelling errors and variants, Tibetans involved in textual reproduction commonly inscribe commentary and corrections between the lines, interpolate and append excerpts from other documents, expand sections with fresh content, extrapolate swaths without citation into distinct documents often with distinct purposes, and even redact the words of original authors revered as omniscient and enlightened.

Unlike xylographs, where at least one hard copy is preserved for as long as the carved blocks remain, the reproduction of manuscripts tends to smooth most irregularities like sands in the ebb and flow of recensional tides. The alterations evident in one manuscript may be invisibly integrated into a copy that follows: errors are corrected, others introduced, and new inclusions from distinct documents are incorporated, as may be the interlinear notes and marginalia of various readers. Without several versions to compare, it thus becomes difficult but certainly not impossible to retrace the transformation of Tibetan manuscripts over time. While much detail is lost, evidence of some textual manipulations remains. I thus rely on textual criticism and comparative analysis of all available versions as the primary methodologies to cull evidence and propose theses, beginning with the compilation and transmission of Nyangrel's two biographies. These inform my analysis of his inception of the first complete narrative of Tri Songdetsen and Padmasambhava, now known as the *Copper Island* and replicated within a *History of Buddhism* also attributed to him, that became the emic history of Tibet's golden age.

"Nyangrel Nyima Öser (1124–92) is one of the more perplexing figures in Tibet's cultural history. His importance for being the first to introduce Padmasambhava as *the* Tibetan culture hero cannot be overestimated, as are the revelatory texts and perhaps also the history of Buddhism in India and Tibet with which he is credited. Yet not much is known about his intellectual and spiritual development. In his splendid study, Hirshberg sums up his importance in the following words: 'Nyangrel was both the architect of his enlightened identity and the product of his time. He was at once an excavator of Tibet's past and the author of its future.' Hirshberg's meticulous analyses go a long way in leading us to understand the text-historical issues that beset his hagiography of Padmasambhava and his chronicle of Buddhism. No one engaged in the serious study of Tibetan culture can ignore this masterful work that is destined to change minds."
—Leonard van der Kuijp, Harvard University

"The centrality of the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava to Tibetan historical sensibilities has long been understood, but the formation of the key legends and their promulgation as virtually a national mythology have only recently begun to receive the sustained attention of scholars. In *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, Daniel Hirshberg advances the inquiry, demonstrating the interrelations that emerged among Tibetan cultural memory, Buddhist theories of reincarnation, and the ongoing revelation of terma, or 'treasures.' I highly recommend this important contribution to the history of Buddhism in Tibet."
—Matthew Kapstein, University of Chicago and École Pratique des Hautes Études

"Hirshberg's remarkable study throws an entirely new light on Nyangrel Nyima Öser, one of the most influential figures in the entire history of Tibetan religion. Hirshberg's point of departure is Nyangrel's production of the famous *Copper Island Biography of Padmasambhava*. In addition, Hirshberg goes on to show how Nyangrel also shaped wider Tibetan Buddhism in several fundamentally important yet hitherto unexpected ways, far beyond the confines of the Nyingma school that he is already well known for having re-founded."
—Robert Mayer, Oxford University

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