One of the Indian pandits who were invited to Tibet in the dynastic period was Vimalamitra. Later sources (from the 12th century onwards) describe him as one of the main transmitters of the rDzogs chen teachings, and this is what makes him an especially interesting figure.

According to the sBa bzhed, which is one of our earliest historical sources, King Khri srong lde btsan sends for an Indian paṇḍita, and Vimalamitra arrives to continue the teachings of Padma Sambhava. The sBa bzhed says:

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btsan po lha sras kyi zhal nas | ā tsarya 'i gsungs dang sbyar na kho bo 'i tshes kyang yun ring po mi thub ces thugs ngal mdzad nas thugs las chung ngu la gshol bar bzhed nas | pantita gcig spyan 'dren du btang pas | ā tsarya bi ma la mi tra byon nas | slob dpon padma sam bha wa'i chos 'phro zhus nas sgom mdzad par bzhed nas | sras mu ne btsan po la chab srid bskos pa dang | blon zhang 'u ring btsan po la bsko ba'i gros | ...
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The king, son of the gods, said, “According to the sayings of the ācārya, I cannot have a long life.” This made him sad, so wishing to put it off his mind somewhat, he sent an invitation for a paṇḍita, and therefore the ācārya Vimalamitra came. Then [the king] received the rest of the teachings of Padma Sambhava [from Vimalamitra]; and since [the king] wished to perform meditation, he commissioned his son Mu ne btsan po with the kingdom, and the minister 'U ring was appointed advisor.¹

If we follow the chronology of the sBa bzhed, this places the arrival of Vimalamitra around AD 795: at least after the Council of Tibet, which ended in 794, but before the resignation of King Khri srong lde btsan sometime before his death in 797.

We find a few scattered references to Vimalamitra in the old material. In the Dunhuang collections there is a single text ascribed to Vimalamitra, the S. tib. 688. In the bSarn gtan mig sgron¹ we find quotations from a text called Bi ma la'i klong 'grel on p. 9,1; the same is again quoted on p. 276,4 with


² bSam gtan mig sgron, ed. S. W. Tashigangpa, Shanrtsis Shesrig Spendzod, Vol. 74, Leh, 1974.
a slight deviation in the spelling: Byi ma la'i klong 'grel. Until now, I have not been able to identify this text. And in the IHan dkar Catalogue\(^3\) we find Vimalamitra as the author of two texts, both in section XX, Theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i tiṅkā. These are No. 519, where the entry reads:

\[
\text{Shes rab kyi pa rol du phyin pa bdun brgya pa'i grel pa} \mid \text{slob dpon Vimalamitras mdzad pa} \mid 2,100 \text{ sloka} \mid 7 \text{ bam po} \mid
\]

and No. 529:

\[
\text{Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel pa} \mid \text{slob dpon Vimalamitras mdzad pa} \mid 300 \text{ sloka} \mid 1 \text{ bam po} \mid
\]

Both texts are found in the bsTan 'gyur, as No. 5214 and No. 5217 in the Tibetan Tripiṭaka Peking Edition (TTP).

Our main sources of information for the life of Vimalamitra are later writings, especially the Blue Annals, and the writings of Nyang ral pa can and Klong chen pa.\(^4\)

In the Blue Annals Vimalamitra is mentioned as the transmitter of rDzogs chen to Tibet together with Padma Sambhava, and for the first time the possibility of two Vimalamitrás is mentioned:

Now, it is stated in ancient records about the ācārya Vimalamitra that there had been two Vimalamitrás during the reigns of the religious kings Khri srong lde btsan and mNga’ bdag Ral pa can. The “earlier” lived during the reign of the religious king Khri srong lde btsan. He did not dress in monastic robes but went about attired as a yogin. Therefore the king and his ministers expressed doubt as to whether he was a heretic, or a Buddhist. Doubts were also expressed, because, while making obeisance, he had broken an image of Vairocana. In order to remove the doubts of the ministers he composed the sKyabs 'gro yan lag drug pa, in which he said, “The king and ministers did not believe, so I composed the ‘Six Branches of the Refuge-taking Ceremony’.” He also composed the Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel pa, the Rim gyis 'jug pa'i sgom don and the Cig char 'jug pa'i sgom don. To judge from the method [employed in these books] he must have lived after the ācārya Kamalaśīla. The “later” Vimalamitra is the author of the So sor thar pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa bam po lnga bcu pa. He should be regarded as a monk. The “earlier” Vimala taught

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\(^4\) The Blue Annals were written by ’Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, 1476–8. Nyang ral pa can lived from 1136–1204, and Klong chen pa, 1308–64.
Unfortunately, ’Gos lo tsa ba does not go into further details about the above-mentioned “ancient records”, which he appears to have seen.

This description of two Vimalamitras has recently been mentioned by Western scholars like Gómez and Davidson, and it seems that their only source is the Blue Annals. Since the Blue Annals refer solely to what texts the two Vimalamitras are supposed to have written, and unidentified “ancient records”, it might prove fruitful to take a look at the texts authored by Vimalamitra. We find texts ascribed to Vimalamitra in different collections: the bsTan ’gyur, Bi ma snying thig, and Rin chen gter mdzod. Of these, the Bi ma snying thig and Rin chert gter mdzod are collections of gter ma-s, which make them doubtful as historical sources. This leaves us with the texts found in the bsTan ’gyur, where we also find the texts mentioned by the Blue Annals. The Shes rab snying po ’i rgya cher ’grel pa is No. 5217, the Rim gyis ’jug pai sgom don is No. 5334, and the Cig car ’jug pa ’i sgorn don is No. 5306 in the 7TP. The reason for ’Gos lo tsa ba to say that the “early” Vimalamitra lived after Kamalaśīla is of course that the Rim gyis ’jug pa and the Cig car ’jug pa are related to the Council of Tibet. But as I have shown earlier, the Cig car ’jug pa was not written by Vimalamitra, but is based on a Dunhuang treatise, and later on it was (probably) falsely attributed to Vimalamitra, perhaps to give the treatise greater authority.7

Here it is interesting to see that these two texts are not found in the IHan dkar Catalogue, while the first text mentioned by the Blue Annals, the Shes rab snying po ’i rgya cher ’grel pa (No. 529) is included as the work of Vimalamitra. The “earlier” Vimalamitra is thus identical to the person described in the more or less legendary accounts we have of Vimalamitra.

Of the “later” Vimalamitra we have only one item of information: the statement of ’Gos lo tsa ba that he wrote the So sor thar pa ’i rgya cher ’grel pa ban po lnga bcu pa. We know no biography, not even the most sketchy, of the “later” Vimalamitra. If we look in the bsTan ’gyur, we find the text mentioned by the Blue Annals: the So sor thar pa ’i mdo rgya cher ’grel pa ’dul ba kun las btus pa, No. 5607 in TTP, and authored by Dri med bshes gnyen, the Tibetan translation of Vimalamitra’s name. We can be reasonably sure

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that this is the same text, since it is described in the IHan dkar Catalogue as No. 499, having fifty bam po-s: “So sor thar pa’i rgya cher ’brel pa ’dul ba kun las btus pa | 15,000 śloka | 50 bam po”. This of course also means that the text was written and translated before the time of the composition of the IHan dkar Catalogue. Now the IHan dkar Catalogue was written in either 812 or 824. We can therefore safely assume that the text was composed before 824 by the “later” Vimalamitra.

If we follow Tucci, the date of the IHan dkar Catalogue is 812. This means that the “earlier” and the “later” Vimalamitra would almost be contemporary, as the “earlier” Vimalamitra is considered to have stayed in Tibet for 13 years. If we add 13 years to the tentative date for the arrival of Vimalamitra, c., 795, we get 808, which is very close to the composition of the IHan dkar Catalogue in 812. If there should have been two Vimalamitras, they almost certainly would have met in Tibet, but this does not tally with the statements given by the Blue Annals. Further, we can see that the information we find in the IHan dkar Catalogue does not support the assumption of two Vimalamitras. The Catalogue lists one text of the “earlier” Vimalamitra (No. 529) and one by the “later” Vimalamitra (No. 499) without making any distinction; on the other hand the two other texts mentioned by ’Goslo tsa ba, the Cig car ’jug pa and the Rim gyis jug pa are not listed in the IHan dkar Catalogue. If we add all this up, the most credible solution is that there was only one Vimalamitra, who wrote some of the texts credited to him, and the rest was credited to him by posterity, as in the case of the Cig car ’jug pa.

That there is only one Vimalamitra is supported by ’Jigs med gling pa from another viewpoint. He refers clearly to views like the one brought forward in the Blue Annals, when he writes in his dKar chag to the rNying ma rgyud ’bum:

Bi ma la snga phyi gnyis su byon par ’dod pa ni | slob dpon ’di mdo sngags kyi chos rgya mtsho lha bu la mkhas pas so so thar pa’i rgya cher ’grel la sogs pa’i bstan bcos dgag par mi nus pa dag mchis pa | rdzogs pa chen po phyogs gshan du ’phul bar ’dod pa dag gis kun slong min na rung ste | don la shes rab snying po’i rgya cher ’grel dang | rim gyis dang | cig char ’jug pa’i sgom don gnyis kyang slob dpon ’dis mdzad cing | yer pa’i dkar chag las rab byung gi mkhan po mdzad pa’i lo rgyus bsnyad pa sogs rtags kyang gang yin bsgrub dka’ la | spyir phags pa’i gnas brtan bcu drug dang | jo bo a ti sha yang bshul lam la na bza’ dkar po yin la | bod de la khyim par ’dzin pa gsan bas na bza’ rjes nas phebs pa sogs rtags ’ba’ zhi la nges pa kho na’ang yod dka’o | de ltar lo bcu gsum bod yul du bzhugs nas star rgya nag ri bo rtse lngar gshegs |

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It is believed [by some] that there were two Vimalamitras, an “earlier” and a “later”. Since that teacher had knowledge of the *sutras* and the *tantras* equal to the ocean, it is clearly so that the *So so thar pa’i rgya cher ’grel* and other treatises cannot be refuted by the sages [as authentic works of Vimalamitra]. It might be that their intention is that they want to push rDzogs chen aside, but in reality the *Shes rab snying po’i rgya cher ’grel*, the *Rim gyis*, and the *Cig char ’jug pa’i sgom don* are also written by this teacher. In the *Yer pa Catalogue* there are stories about how [Vimalamitra] was the *mkhan po* of ordinations; and it is difficult to know what kind of dress he was wearing. Generally, the sixteen Arhats and also the Master Atiśa travelled in white clothes. When they heard that in Tibet this was considered the clothing of the lay people, they changed their clothes and went on. So it is really difficult to determine [what people are] by the clothes they wear. Thus [Vimalamitra] stayed thirteen years in Tibet, then he went back to Ri bo rtse Inga [Wutai Shan] in China.9

So, according to ’Jigs med gling pa, there is no reason to believe that there were two Vimalamitras. To him there are no contradictions in Vimalamitra’s authorship. This might give us a clue as to why ’Gos lo tsa ba is talking of two Vimalamitras. From his remarks it looks as if he did not consider it acceptable that a *yogin* could be author of both tantric texts and *vinaya* texts. He might therefore have thought it necessary to introduce two authors by the same name.

* 

If we take a closer look at the texts authored by Vimalamitra found in the *bsTan ’gyur*, it becomes even more likely that we are only dealing with one Vimalamitra. In the *TTP* we find twenty-six texts attributed to Vimalamitra’s authorship.10

Of these texts, nineteen are rather brief treatises found in the *rgyud ’grel* section, and dealing with various practices of the tantras and meditation. These are in complete concord with the traditional picture of Vimalamitra. In many cases the translators are not mentioned; but whenever they are, it is always translators who are normally associated with the early translation period around 800. Foremost come the well-known disciples of Vimalamitra, rMa Rin chen mchog and Jñānakumāra as the translators of Vimalamitra’s tantric works.

There is one small text from the *Ngo mtshar bstan bcos* section, and three are found in the *dBu ma* section. These three are the already mentioned

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10 *TTP*, Nos. 2941, 3505, 3931, 4724, 4725, 4732, 4738, 4740, 4746, 4747, 4755, 4759, 4764, 4765, 4769, 4772, 4776, 4777, 4780, 5214, 5217, 5306, 5334, 5367 (= 5479), 5607, 5917.
sKyabs 'gro yan lag drug pa, the Cig car 'jug pa, and the Rim gyis 'jug pa. In both the Cig car 'jug pa and the Rim gyis 'jug pa Ye shes sde is mentioned as co-translator. But since the Cig car 'jug pa was not written by Vimalamitra, and these two texts clearly form a unit, it is best to exclude both of them when we evaluate the authorship of Vimalamitra.

Then there are two texts from the Sher phyin section. One of them does not mention the translators; for the other one the names Vimalamitra, Bande Nam mkha’, and Ye shes snying po are given.

The single vinaya commentary So sor thar pa’i mdo rgya cher ‘grel pa ‘dul ba kun las btus pa from the ’Dul bai ‘grel pa section was translated by Jinamitra, Sarvajñānadeva, and Klu’i rgyal mtshan; in the context of the two Vimalamitras it is interesting to see that we also find here translators from the early translation period, something which is in complete concord with the other texts ascribed to Vimalamitra.

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I will now return to the Dunhuang text, S. tib. 688. It is an interesting text since, of the texts that we know were not redacted after the 10th century, it is the only one we are able to link with Vimalamitra. The text is complete, and consists of three pages with five lines each. It deals with rosaries. In this paper I will only touch lightly on this text. It begins thus:

'phreng ba’i lung | don rnam pa bdun gis bstan de | slobs dpon gang gis mdzad pa dang | rgyud gang las btus pa dang | 'khu (= khungs) pa gang las byung ba dang | mtshams gang du gtopics pa dang | so so’i rigs ma nor bar bstan pa bgrang ba’i thabs dang | bsam rgyud ma nor ba dang | don las mtshan du gsol pa’o | ’di mdzad pa’i slobs dpon ni | rgya gar gi mkhan po pan pyi ta stong lnga brgya’i nang na | bye ma la mu tras mdzad | rgyud phyogs ni thub pa A ba da ra las btus | khung ni rgya gar gi yul na | shing bod de slag ...

The subject of the ’Phreng bai lung is taught in seven parts:
Which ācārya is the author,
Which tantras are relied on,
Where it comes from,
What are the rules connected with it;
It shows the different kinds [of rosary] without mistakes,
the technique of counting,
[How to use them] without a mistaken mind, and
The name given from the inner meaning.
Concerning the ācārya who is the author of this work:
It was written by Bye ma la mu tra,

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11 I am preparing a more thorough investigation and translation.
one of the 1,500 Indian paṇḍita.
Concerning the tantras: they were obtained from
the Accomplished A ba da ra la.
Concerning the origin: in India, the bodhi-tree …

Now, here the name of the author is given as “Bye ma la mu tra”. According to Klong chen pa
this is the same as Vimalamitra. Klong chen pa says in the Zab mo yang thig:

At that time in ‘Glang po’i sgang’ in the Western part of India, the Dharmarāja Aśoka’s
daughter Dharmabodhi had a son called Bye ma la mu tra, who was a great ācārya.¹²

Then the following is written as a note to this, in smaller letters:

Some say that because he was fatherless his mother hid him in a sandpit, but he did not
die and his eyes looked around with a clear expression; therefore he was called “the
mudrā in the sand”. Some [others] say that he knew the Dharma as well as how to
traverse a mound of sand, and therefore he was called thus. People who believe that are
just talking nonsense. In the gYu yig can a father is mentioned, and that is in opposition
[to the first story]. Therefore, from the A ti bkod pa chen po: “The foremost of the
sages is staying in Ka ma ru.” So is it prophesied; and further: ‘Bye ma’ is translated as
“rgya chen”, and mudrā is “phyag rgya”, which gives Bye ma la mu tra. As his
ordination name he received the name Vimalamitra, or Dri med bshes gnyen.

This story is of course legendary, but contains nevertheless the basic information that Bye ma la mu tra
is the same person as Vimalamitra. It is therefore reasonable to assume that S.tib. 688 is a genuine work
of Vimalamitra, something which is also supported by the contents of the text. A manual of rosaries is
a very appropriate subject for the yogin-scholar that Vimalamitra appears to have been.

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We also find another occurrence of the name “Bi ma (la)”/”Bye ma la”. In the sBa bzhed we find the
following rendering, dealing with the Council of Tibet:

Ma hā ya na’i slob ma las | myang sha mis rang gi sha btubs snya bye ma la dang
rngog rin po ches rang gi pho mtshan brdungs |

¹² Klong chen pa dri med ’od zer: sNying thig ya bzhi, Vol. 11: Zab mo yang tig, Part 2, reprinted by
Tulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi, New Delhi, 1971, p. 95, 3–6.
Of Mahāyāna’s disciples, Myang sha mi cut up his own flesh; sNya bye ma la and rNgog rin po che crushed their own genitals.\textsuperscript{13}

This passage has been mentioned earlier by both Tucci and Demiéville.\textsuperscript{14} Both of them consider this person to be a Tibetan and suggest that he is the same as a certain Pimolo mentioned in the Chinese dossier translated by Demiéville. But Demiéville goes further, suggesting that this “Vimala” is the same as Vimalamitra, and poses the question as to whether Vimalamitra is a Tibetan. I do not think that there is any evidence to connect these two—the Vimala who is obviously a Tibetan with the clan name “sNyag”, and the yogin-scholar Vimalamitra who is probably an Indian, as I have just shown.

The earliest sources we have on the life of Vimalamitra are the works of Nyang ral pa can. In his Chos byung\textsuperscript{15} the circumstances of his invitation to Tibet are related. This description is the prototype of Vimalamitra’s biography as found in later sources, i.e. in Klong chen pa’s sNying thigya bzhi, and in the biographies of Padma Sambhava; in the “discovered” by O rgyan gling pa (1329–67), and likewise the gSer “discovered” by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–96). These relationships I intend to investigate later, in an attempt to trace the biography of Vimalamitra as far back as possible. In any case, I do not think that we have to worry about the question of one or two Vimalamitras any more; if there were two, the so-called “later” one is of no consequence whatsoever, as all available information on Vimalamitra appears to refer to the “earlier” Vimalamitra.

\textsuperscript{13} BZC, p. 65,2. The other versions of the sBa bzhed give slightly different spellings: the BZS, p. 55,2, “mnya’ bi ma”; the CBKhG, p. 58,1,5, “sNyags bye ma la”; and NRCB (see note 15), p. 288,1,3.

\textsuperscript{14} See Gómez’s summary of this discussion in note 21, pp. 431–2 of his “Indian Materials” (see note 6, above).