

Per K Sørensen. *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography. The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies. An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle: rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long*. Asiatische Forschungen 128. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994. pp. xii, 675. DM 156,-.

With this momentous work, appropriately dedicated to the memory of the great Danish tibetologist and historian Erik Haarh, Per Sørensen affords the first translation of the *rGyal-rabs chos-'byung gsal-ba'i me-long*, a famous ecclesiastical history of the royal genealogies of Tibet from their mythical origin to the first half of the fourteenth century, written in the 1360s and occupying a normative position in Tibetan historiography. This text was regarded by Giuseppe Tucci as “the model” for the subsequent Tibetan historiographical tradition and has been defined by Luciano Petech as “the history of Tibet par excellence”. The prestige which *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* has enjoyed in Central as well as Eastern Asia is confirmed by its two eighteenth century Mongolian versions and at least two recent Chinese translations.

This text has already been the object of Per Sørensen's attention, in a monograph published less than ten year ago (*A Fourteenth Century Tibetan Historical Work: rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-loṅ. Author, Date and Sources. A Case Study*, Akademisk Forlag: Copenhagen, 1986), in which the Danish tibetologist attributed its authorship to the noted Buddhist scholar Bla-ma dam-pa bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan (1312–75), the fourteenth prince-abbot of the powerful monastery of Sa-skya.

The original text was first printed in Lhasa in 1478 and later in sDe-dge in the middle of the eighteenth century. A transliterated edition by Bronislaw Kuznetsov, based upon those two Tibetan editions, but containing a number of errors, was published by Brill in 1966. A more reliable edition based upon the sDe-dge one was published in Beijing in 1981, and a new critical edition of the Tibetan text is now being prepared by Sørensen himself. The Danish tibetologist's translation is based upon the sDe-dge edition, with occasional references to the Lhasa one, and replaces Tadasu Mitsushima's incomplete and somehow unsatisfactory English rendering, which was published in four issues of *Kokushikan Daigaku Kyōyō Ronshū*, in the 1970s.

Sørensen's elegant translation, intentionally more literary than literal, is nevertheless faithful to the Tibetan text, to the extent that in the metrical sections the author has followed the sequence of the original verses. The Danish tibetologist has not confined himself to a brilliant English rendering of a rather difficult Tibetan text dealing chiefly with the early history of Tibet. He has also analysed in great depth the various editions of over thirty important and largely untranslated Tibetan historical works, some of which only recently published, prior and contemporary to the text he has

edited and translated, as well as the most relevant subsequent ones, such as dPa'-bo gTsong-lag-phreng-ba's celebrated *mKhas-pa'i dga'-ston*. Page and even line references to these and other works are published together with the results of Sørensen's research in a rich apparatus of over two thousand footnotes altogether, many of which are expanded in eighteen appendixes, corresponding to the chapters of the *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long* (pp. 489–608) and including long edited quotations from the Tibetan texts taken into consideration as well as comparative tables.

As pointed out by Sørensen himself in the preface (pp. 24–5), two of the most significant data emerging from this work and from its comparison with other historical sources concern the history of Tibetan art. The first one is that the most ancient Buddhist temple founded in Tibet is not, as generally held, the famous 'Phrul-snang (later: Jo-khang) of Ra-sa (later: Lhasa), but the rather neglected temple erected at Khra-'brug, in the Yar-klung Valley (southern Tibet). The second is that from the very beginning Tibetan art was heavily influenced by the artistic tradition of the Nepal Valley through the massive presence of Newar artists and artisans who were employed in the construction and decoration of the 'Phrul-snang and other buildings, both religious and secular, during the first half of the seventh century: according to Sørensen the 'Phrul-snang itself is Newar in artistic expression, concept and origin" (p. 25). To these two remarks two more considerations may be added, which concern the religious and political history of Tibet.

The first one concerns the definition of the role played by the *bon* religious movement in early Tibet. In his *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, David Snellgrove has argued that the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, based as it was on the indigenous cult of the royal tombs and on sacrifices—to which a reference may be found on p. 152 of this very work, in the section entitled [V] "sTag-ri gnyan-gzigs", where King 'Brang-snyan-lde-ru and his queen are said to have been "buried alive" in their tomb—should not be confused with the *bon* religion, which, from its very first introduction from the territories lying west of the Land of Snows, was impregnated with Buddhist doctrines.

In this respect the references to the *bon* religion found throughout bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan's *Mirror of the Royal Genealogies* are exemplary: *bon* is said to have been introduced from the west during the time of King sPu-lde gung-rgyal (pp. 144–5), but none of the kings of Tibet is said to have followed that religion, not even those who, according to the Buddhist ecclesiastical tradition, opposed Buddhism. Interestingly enough, nowhere does bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan refer to *bon* as being the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and no followers of *bon* are mentioned in connection with the protagonists of the "Introduction of Anti-Buddhist Laws and Persecution", "the Anti-Buddhist Revolt", "King Glang-dar-ma" and "The Regicide by lHa-lung dPal'gyi rdo-rje" (sections V and XIX–XXI of Chapter 18), in spite of Sørensen's suggestion that Glang-dar-ma was a follower of *bon* (p. 410). Even Srong-brtsan-sgam-po's "prophecy" concerning Glang-dar-ma's anti-Buddhist reaction (p. 332)

does not include any mention of a *bon-po* involvement in the “persecution”.

Indeed the “Bon-Buddhist Controversy” dealt with in section VI of Chapter 18 takes place only *after* the ministers who had opposed Buddhism (and who nowhere are mentioned as followers of *bon*) and had prohibited its practice have been banished. Only then were Buddhist and *bon* adherents free to compete in a debate on equal standing, and the latter were defeated, whereby some of their texts were concealed and others destroyed (this controversy should be understood with the consideration that the followers of *bon* have never disputed the truth of Buddhism as such: they simply claimed that it was first promulgated by gShen-rab, and that Śākyamuni learned the doctrine at second hand). This passage in particular reveals that bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan was aware of the fact that by Srong-brtsan sgam-po’s time *bon* was a sophisticated religion with its own literature, in a position to vie with the other Buddhist schools. *Bon* appears again as part of a common belief system when bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan refers to the symbolism of the plan of the Jo-khang, the most venerated Buddhist temple in Tibet, which was designed to please the three different categories of priest-monks (*bla-ma*), tantric practitioners (*sngags-pa*), and followers of *bon* (*bon-po*; p. 274). Finally, one of the main protagonists of the Buddhist revival in eleventh century Tibet was the son of a *bon-po* (pp. 447–8).

The second consideration is of a cultural as well as political nature. The role of China in the shaping of Tibetan civilization from the sixth century, and even before, is mentioned by bSod-nams rgyal-mtshan particularly with reference to medicine, geomantic divination, handicrafts, and arithmetic (see for example pp. 153, 180, 232). However, the awkwardness of the political relations between Tibet and China from the dawn of history, in contrast with the ease of the connections of Tibet with the Nepal Valley, appears in many passages of Chapter 13, dealing with the invitation of the Chinese princess Wencheng Gongzhu to Tibet, which relate the difficulties experienced by the Tibetan minister mGar at the Tang court before being granted the hand of the princess for his king, Srong-brtsan sgam-po. The strain of this relationship is summarized by the minister’s somehow prophetic statement concerning his experience in China at the close of the chapter (p. 249): “Aside from one Chinese hostess, not one single sympathetic Chinese was found.”

Sørensen’s monumental work lends itself only to criticism of a minor kind. The rare flaws found in his excellent study seem to be due almost exclusively to the vastness of the undertaking. It is not clear, for example, what the author means by “sacerdotal” when referring to the *bon* religion (p. 2). In fact, in spite of his mention of Snellgrove’s *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* in the bibliography, the Danish tibetologist seems to follow Hoffmann’s identification of *bon* with the indigenous religion of Tibet and thus chooses to ascribe the anti-Buddhist activities during the monarchic period to *bon-po* circles rather than to the followers of the indigenous religion of Tibet (see for example p. 606). In this way Sørensen explains the minister Ma-zhang

Khron-pa-skyes' opposition to Buddhism as a consequence of his sympathy for *bon* (p. 363, n. 1171), preferring to follow the indication of one Tibetan source, the *Srid-rgyud*, rather those of the work he translates or of other historical texts: by Sørensen's own admission, in the sBa-bzhed and related sources Ma-zhangs name is "signally absent from the list of participants" in the debate between the followers of *bon* and those of other Buddhist schools, while the *rGyal-rabs chos-'byung gsal-ba'i me-long* does not even qualify him as a follower of *bon*.

Strictly speaking Sørensen's occasional use of the word "fresco" (*passim*) is inappropriate, since that technique has never been used in Tibetan and Himalayan wall painting. On the last line of p. 67, "Vajrāsana" should presumably be replaced by "Vārāṇasī, as found in all historical accounts concerning the erection of the particular image referred to (cf. p. 498). Kho-bom (pp. 159 and 202) cannot be Kathmandu (elsewhere correctly identified in Yam-bu Ya-'gal; see for example pp. 193–5), but obviously corresponds to Bhatgaon (Tib. Kho-khom): the Nāga-palace of the Newar king (Narendra?) Deva corresponds to the royal palace of Bhatgaon, on the back of which two beautiful gilded copper *naga* figures still stand next to the royal bath. "IXth century", when speaking of Padmasambhava (p. 330, n. 1041), is obviously a misprint for "VIIIth century".

The "lotus and moon" understood by Sørensen as referring to the embossed decoration of a supposed "cushion" in the description of the eleven-headed manifestation of Avalokiteśvara (p. 337) is more likely to correspond to the Tibetan technical term *pad-zla'i gdan*, referring to the white "lunar lotus", upon which peaceful deities stand or sit (see for example G. Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica*, IV/1, Rome 1941, p. 170), as opposed to the red "sun lotus" of wrathful deities. It is not clear what Sørensen means by "first" when he states, "Aside from this 'ritual' death of the Chinese consort in actual fact she survived Srong-btsan sgam-po by about thirty years, as she first passed away in 680 A. D." (p. 341, n. 1086).¹ Srong-btsan sgam-po is described in the text as 'Dus-srong mang-po-rje's "grandfather" (p. 349), whereas the former was in fact latter's great-grandfather. Finally, the architectural term *dbu-rtse* designates the turret above the main temple or body of a monastic building, rather than a "cupola" (p. 474, n. 1788), while *gzims-khang* is perhaps better rendered as "private residence" than as "[meditation] cella" (p. 475, n. 1799).

Sørensen's profuse bibliography has been divided into Western Sources (pp. 611–32) and Tibetan Sources (pp. 632–45), both primary and secondary, the former affording detailed historiographical information on the most important texts used by Sørensen. Only few of the works referred to in the notes without full bibliographic references are missing from the bibliography: B. Steinmann (1987) and S. S. Strickland (1983; p. 2, n. 4), Macdonald (1967;

¹ This sentence should in fact read, "... as she did not pass away until 680 A.D."—*Ed.*

p. 37, n. 108), Eimer and Tsering, *Documenta Barbarorum* (p. 47, n. 28), Chos-kyi nyi-ma's *Grub-mtha' shel-gyi me-long* (p. 144, n. 385), Aris, 1980 (p. 153, n. 428), Petech, 1973 (p. 168, n. 462), Szerb, 1981 (p. 411, n. 1422), C. Mackerras's *The Uighur Empire according to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, 1972 (p. 457, n. 1684). Kun-dga'-rgyal-mtshan's *bKa'-gdams chos-'byung* and the *Myang chos-'byung* (see for example p. 469, n. 1758). The acrostics **BGR** (*passim*), **BGRSPH** (p. 147, n. 394), and **VV** (pp. 50–2, notes; presumably *Vinaya*) are not listed either. Finally, I. Alsop's study on the famous statue of 'Phags-pa Lokeśvara, "Phagpa Lokeśvara of the Potala" (*Orientalia*, XXI/4, 1990) seems to have been overlooked and has not been mentioned at the end of the relevant section (Chapter XI). The Index (pp. 655–75) includes a number of Tibetan and Sanskrit names and place names as well as a list of Tibetan expression and idioms.

Sørensen's work is a major step forward not only towards a deeper knowledge of Tibetan history and historiography, but also for the study of the religious and artistic history of Tibet. References to specific monuments and works of art as well as iconographic descriptions are found scattered in the book and commented upon extensively in the notes. The importance of the study of original texts for the history of Tibetan art can hardly be overemphasised if scholars are to take heed of Gene Smith's warning in his introduction to Kongtrul's *Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Culture* (New Delhi, 1970, p. 52): "The pontifications of eminent museologists and art historians regarding the characteristics and dates of the various styles and schools represent nothing but uninformed guesses." Aware of the fact that Tibetan historical texts translated into European languages are still too rare, Sørensen is presently working on the translation of yet another outstanding early historical work: sBa gSal-snan's *sBa-bzhed*. We may only hope that the Danish tibetologist's undertaking will reach the high scholarly standards set by this edition and translation of *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, a book which is bound to become a standard reference work in the field of Tibetan and Central Asian studies.

Eberto F. Lo Bue
University of Milan