Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places
In Tibetan Culture

A Collection of Essays

Edited by
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There is a variety of oral and written literature that can help us to understand Tibetan ideas concerning the sacred ordering of the natural environment. An outline of the general characteristics of "guide-book" literature is given in Wylie's pioneering study of Tibetan geography (1965), where a division of the material into four types is proposed. These types are the *dkar-chag* ("register"), *gnas-bshad" ("guide-book"), *lam-yig" ("passport") and *go-la'i kha-byang" ("global-description"). The examples selected by the author undoubtedly justify such a division, but there is also a large quantity of literature besides this that combines features of two or more of these types. Whatever they may properly signify, some of the terms themselves seem to be used almost interchangeably by Tibetan writers: two of the works we shall examine below, the *Bod yul gnas kyi lam yig* and the *Rgya gar gnas kyi dkar chag*, would, in spite of their titles, fall under the *gnas-bshad* type as defined by Wylie.¹

Quite apart from their defiance of discrete categories, these guides are by no means the only body of literature to tell us about Tibetan conceptions of geography. They sometimes represent an extreme formalization of a particular convention for describing landscape, and it would be misleading to regard the genre as the exclusive representative of geographical literature. Moreover, to focus too closely on such guides would tend to obscure the importance of certain preoccupations that have undoubtedly played a part in the development of the genre. An example that will be given particular attention below is the relationship between topography and political territory; although sacred representations of the landscape are an important idiom for conceptualizing territory, political considerations are often detectable in guides only in a vestigial form.

In the following pages I shall examine a range of examples that suggest quite different models of the sacred landscape. The aim of the inquiry is less to
establish a satisfactory classification of geographical works than to observe the plurality of geographical schemes implicit in the sources, and to attempt to discern a pattern in the relationship between them. The typology that emerges suggests a chronological evolution in geographical representations; and indeed the stages proposed do correspond broadly to the relative antiquity of the literature in question. Nevertheless, we should not lay undue stress on the idea of an evolution of representations. A particular model may be demonstrably late, but its appearance by no means renders “earlier” concepts obsolete. A certain degree of complexity does not lend itself to oral representation, and is therefore unlikely to acquire much currency among unlettered villagers, who continue to entertain other ideas concerning the disposition and sacred significance of topographical features.

Furthermore, even among, say, educated pilgrims, there is no reason why different, apparently conflicting, geographical conceptions should not be held simultaneously. The way in which the landscape is perceived is a contextual matter, more or less schematic according to the purpose for which it is being represented. A model that reduces China to a quincunx of landmarks inhabited by owl-faced dikini-s does not help mystified Tibetan pilgrims to find their way around an unfamiliar country. Equally, times of trains and walking distances between shrines in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and the Punjab will do little to enlighten the reader about the significance of India’s shape in the mandala of the world.

Parenthetically, it may be remarked that much the same is true of Western geographical conventions. The inclusion of contours and other natural features on a road map would constitute an unnecessary distraction. The absence of such details would render a hiker’s map both useless and dangerous. The “map” of the London underground is as cavalier as any territorial map relating to Himalayan sacred sites! Furthermore, even among, say, educated pilgrims, there is no reason why different, apparently conflicting, geographical conceptions should not be held simultaneously. The way in which the landscape is perceived is a contextual matter, more or less schematic according to the purpose for which it is being represented. A model that reduces China to a quincunx of landmarks inhabited by owl-faced dikini-s does not help mystified Tibetan pilgrims to find their way around an unfamiliar country. Equally, times of trains and walking distances between shrines in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and the Punjab will do little to enlighten the reader about the significance of India’s shape in the mandala of the world.

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Finally, it is worth noting that our main concern here is with the idea of sacred, not everyday, space. Tibetans travel a great deal, but not always because they are on pilgrimage. Many Tibetans do indeed walk around mountains because they want to acquire merit, or achieve prosperity, or cure some disease. In most cases, however, when Tibetans walk around mountains it is because the mountains are in the way. Religious concerns should not be exaggerated. Most topographical features are not particularly sacred; but this does not, of course, mean that people do not make cognitive provision for them.

In attempting to formulate a typology of representations of sacred landscape, I shall limit the textual examples as far as possible to Bon-po sources. There are two main reasons for this. First, there are numerous published and unpublished studies relating to Tibetan pilgrimage and sacred geography, but these works deal for the most part with Buddhist sources and holy places. The few exceptions may be cited briefly: Bon-po perspectives on Mt. Kailash are the subject of Norbu and Prats (1989) and Loseries (1994); Karmay (1992), Hanna (1994) and Ramble (1997) deal primarily with Kong-po Bon-ri; while Buffetrille (1994) presents a Bon-po guide to A-myes rma-chen. Cech (1992) provides an interesting discussion of Bon-po sacred sites in general. The narrow focus of the present article will, it is hoped, help to draw attention to a substantial literature that might profitably be used by future students of Bon-po sacred geography.

Secondly, there is a very large amount of Buddhist material available (especially, it seems, in the form of dkar-chag relating to Himalayan sacred sites), and a general assessment of Tibetan sacred geography would have to address this literature. Confining the present study to Bon will avoid the need for more arbitrary selection by circumscribing a coherent area of Tibetan religion. This being said, it will be obvious that such a limitation is itself somewhat artificial and unsatisfactory, insofar as much of the material selected is not unique to Bon. Folk traditions are shared by Tibetan villagers irrespective of their denomination, while the later elaborations of Bon-po territorial mandala-s are formally little different from their Buddhist counterparts.

Representations of Height

One of the more obvious features of Tibetan geography, especially in the Himalayan region, is its strikingly vertical character, and it is therefore not surprising that this aspect should be emphasized in popular celebrations of the landscape. The motif of height recurs as a stock formula in the earliest literature, and continues to be a favourite theme in folksongs and prayers. Unlike the more scholarly literature that we shall turn to presently, these popular representations do not obliterate natural topographic features under a prefabricated model, but they do nevertheless impose a degree of organization through a system of stratification. Perhaps the most fundamental example is the layering of the world into three levels, with humans sandwiched between gods and serpent spirits. Territorial divinities themselves are often considered as inhabiting a three-tiered space. It is possible that this triple formulation should be understood as a development of the more basic dyad of male mountains and female bodies of water. The association is well documented in Tibet, but it also plays an important part in the religion of non-Tibetan ethnic groups of the Himalayas.

The considerable variety of divinities that one may find linked on a vertical axis in different places—and also the fact that a female site may be found to be situated above an associated male one—are grounds for supposing that it is the vertical axis itself that is of primary importance in such constellations. In an earlier work (Ramble 1996) I examined a number of such configurations of place gods, and suggested an association between verticality and the idea of fertility. The identity of the gods found along a vertical axis, and indeed the fact that the “plots” of the axis have a sacred character at all, may be a secondary matter.

What concerns us here is the tangentially related question of the “naturalness” of the imagery with which vertical landscape is portrayed in popular culture. Thus in certain songs the landscape is described as a series of seven formalized strata, each associated with its own representative animal. The genre is widespread in Tibet, but an example from the village of Te, in southern Mustang, will illustrate the point. The particular significance of this song in Te is that it must be sung, with its accompanying steps, to open all sessions of song
and dance in the community. There are seven verses, but often only the first four are sung.

Far up, on high, is the exalted snow mountain.
From within this high place comes
The great snow lion, who rejoices in this place.

Far up, on high, are the exalted crags.
From within this high place there comes
The vulture who rejoices in this place.

And so on, with only the place and its particular denizen changing in each verse as follows:

The slates (rdza): wild yak (’brong)
High meadows (spang): deer (shwa-ba)
Forest (nags): tigress (stag-mo)6
Flat ground [at the foot of the mountain] (thang): wild ass (rkyang)
River (chu): female fish (nya-mo)

The pervasive motif of height (mtho-la yang-stod...stod-mtho) remains unchanged, even in the last verse.

There are other songs that extol the landscape in similar terms, but without populating the several layers with appropriate animals. The example given here does not depart too radically from the observable world in representing vertical space, compared with examples that will be considered below, but natural geography has obviously been subordinated to conventional imagery.

Establishing Boundaries

While it may be generally true that Tibet lacks a tradition of secular geography, an exception might be made for the minimal exigencies of political geography.6 In the culturally Tibetan areas of Nepal, at least, it would certainly be unusual to find collections of village records that did not contain documents relating to territorial boundaries. Disputes between communities over usufruct rights to pasture and forest land are extremely common, and peaceful relations between neighbouring villages depend to a large extent on the existence of texts that delineate frontiers by means of a meticulous description of the territory in question (see Ramble and Vinding 1987 for an example of such a document).

Nevertheless, it is also true that a community’s awareness of its territory is more frequently expressed in terms of sacred space. Between seed-time and harvest, usually at a point where the crops are considered to be vulnerable, it is customary in much of Tibet ritually to walk around the perimeter of the village in order to protect it from possible nocturnal influences. Such circuits are sometimes called chos-skor, “scripture circuits”, since the participants will carry around with them sacred texts, as well as images, to accomplish this defense. It is probably more accurate to understand the purpose of the texts as reinforcing, rather than alone achieving, protection. In Mustang, at least, the circuit is more commonly referred to as klungs-skor, “encircling the fields”, since the route usually encloses only the cultivated area (klungs, which is opposed to ri, uncultivated territory). An important feature of this circuit is the propitiation of various place-gods that lie on the route, and the group will duly halt its progress to perform the appropriate fumigation ritual (bsangs).

I am not aware of any comparable ceremonies for the corresponding circumambulation of a community’s entire territory, including its uncultivated land. Nevertheless, there are ceremonial measures for the protection of larger territories. One of these is the annual closure of a settlement’s boundaries for a given period. This closure seems to be partly symbolic, so that visitors are forbidden to use only certain access routes. For example, three routes into the kingdom of Lo (Glo) are closed for much of the year. The passes in question—two bordering on Tibet and one on Dol-po—are high, and the reason given for their closure is that travellers may disturb the cloud formations that bring the precious rain. Offenders are subject to a fine of Rs. 10,000. The custom of territorial closure is replicated in a number of individual villages within Lo. Penalties for infringement are less severe: in one case (Dri) the punishment comprises a fine of Rs. 500, and in another (De) the public humiliation of the offender. The ostensible reason for the closure is not invariably the risk of jeopardizing rainfall.

In the case of Dri, for example, the practice is said to keep out flocks of rose-finches that would devour the ripening grain. Whatever the case, restricting access to territory, and perhaps also the ritual circuit of the cultivated land, must certainly be understood in terms of the cloistering of villages that is widely practised in south and south-east Asia (cf. Macdonald 1983). In this context we may note the existence, in a number of Himalayan groups, of rituals for the protection of territory that involve an imaginary journey along its perimeter. Two examples that may fall into this category are the mawang sprits of the Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 1994) and the mān khyåne of the Kham Magar (de Sales 1994). In these cases the officiating medium recites aloud the description of the itinerary he is visualizing, and banishes the ills that he encounters on the way. I have suggested (Ramble 1996) that these and similar ceremonies are essentially a stark manifestation of territorial interests that are elsewhere expressed in more elaborate models, such as the political-geographical mandala-s that will be examined below.

A principle that underlies many ritual strategies for healing, protecting or otherwise acting on the phenomenal world, involves merging the latter with an ideal, which may be a myth, a divine realm or some more abstract notion (such as the Void); then performing various transformations in this more malleable sphere and thereby affecting the desired changes in the material world that has been harnessed to it. A given territory is often conceived of as having such a subtle counterpart. The form of this invisible landscape varies considerably within the Tibetan tradition, but at its simplest consists of the divinities who people the landscape and settlements. It would be reasonable, therefore, to regard the ritual texts that accompany the cults of this divine population as constituting a branch of sacred geography. An example that we may consider briefly is a
libation (gsar-skyems) text dealing with oblations to the principal territorial gods of the kingdom of Lo. The work is entitled Smon thang rdzong lha'i mchod 'phrin, “Offerings to the fortress god of Monthang and prayers for his protection”. The copy which I was kindly permitted to photograph in Monthang belonged to the royal chaplain and doctor, the late bKa'ra-shis chos-bzang. It consists of just three folios sewn together inside a titled cover to make a small booklet.

The invocation to the region’s gods begins, as one might expect, at the centre of the kingdom:

In this palace, in the white valley of the land of Lo, at the centre of all kinds of shifting rainbows, is the fierce and mighty rDzong-lha dkar-po. He has one face and two hands, and holds a cane with three knots. On his head he wears a splendid turban of white silk, and there is a joyful smile on his face. His mount is an excellent and swift white horse, with a saddle and bridle adorned with many fine jewels.8

There follows a description of his immediate circle. He is flanked by his divine consort on the right and a female serpent spirit on the left; in the four directions are his four ministers, clockwise from the east: a rgyal-po, a ma-mo, a bdud-po and a btsan on their various mounts. His outer circle is constituted of “many southern men in the prime of life” (phyi-'khor mon-pa'i dar-ma mang-pos skor [skor]). rDzong-lha dkar-po is then invited to receive offerings and to perform the tasks with which he is entrusted. Next to be invoked is the Iron-tressed Protector (Srung [bsrung]-ma lCags-ral-can) of Du-ri mKha'-spyod, the ruined fortress on a hilltop immediately to the north of Monthang, said to be the palace of Amepal, the first king of Lo. Some of the places named are difficult to identify, possibly because they refer to abandoned villages, but many of the main settlements in the kingdom are recognizable. The next group to be invoked includes:

The Shining Female Serpent-spirit of Luri’s junipers; Ti-se dkar-po at the head of Gara’s valley (?); Shar-btsan-po, on the spur of the confluence of the three rivers of Tangkya; Jo-bo phug-phug and Jo-bo bDud of Gemi; Klu-btsan of Drakmar and Chos-rgyal of Tsarang; gTer-chen rNam-thos sras-pos of Gekar.10

These are followed by:

gTer-chen rNam-thos sras-pos (sic: again), the Bon protector of the Ya-ngal lineage; ...the rgyal-po of Chodzong and Ma-khri-rgyal of Samdzong...11

The Ya-ngal are a priestly lineage who came to Lo in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. They were responsible for establishing L ubra, in southern Lo, now the only completely Bon-po village in the region, and for introducing Bon to neighbouring Dol-po (Snellgrove 1967: 4-5). The lineage is still represented in Dol-po. In no other sources have I encountered this explicit association of Nam-thos sras-po, the guardian of the north who is revered as a god of wealth (by association with Kuvera) by both Buddhists and Bon-pos, with the Ya-ngal clan. (For a study of the Ya-ngal gduung-rabs, see Ramble 1984.)

After these come deities of a number of recognizable abandoned sites near Monthang. Much may be said about all these gods and places, and indeed the text would merit a more detailed commentary in a study more specifically dedicated to Lo. For the purposes of the present inquiry, however, the important point is that the work constitutes a register of the main settlements within the kingdom expressed in terms of the chief divinities that inhabit them. It is this parallel, divine world that is invoked to assure the well-being of its material counterpart.

The explicit correspondence between two worlds that is apparent in this text introduces a theme that will receive further attention below: the relationship between sacred and political space. Monthang, the capital of Lo, is also the seat of the principal territorial divinity in the list; the surrounding settlements are the habitations of lesser gods.

A similar correspondence between the political and the sacred is apparent in an interesting work that summarizes the establishment of the capital and the frontiers of the kingdom of Zhang-zhung. The text, entitled Kun ’bum khrul’o bzstungs pa’i dbu phyoqs, or Kun- ’bum for short, forms part of the Bon-po bka’-’gyur. It was discovered by a certain gNyag-ston gZhon-nu-’bum. Although I am unable to establish precise dates for this figure, he is known to have been a disciple of Guru rNNon-rtses who was born in 1136 (cf. Kvaerne 1971: 231). The work may therefore be provisionally dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Among other things, the Kun- ’bum contains numerous details concerning the life of sTon-pa gShen-rab that are not included in his main biographies. The passage that concerns us here begins with gShen-rab’s descent from ‘Ol-mo lung-rin to Zhang-zhung:

Astride the blessed garuda, he set forth to promulgate the Bon doctrine, and alighted first in the land of Zhang-zhung. This is the reason why the doctrine originally came to Zhang-zhung, and this is also how it came to be that the [kings of] Zhang-zhung are called the “kings of Bon”.

sTon-pa gShen-rab passes through a number of places until he reaches central Zhang-zhung:

He went on down from there, and Khung-lung, a magically manifested palace, was built on a site blessed with good fortune, in the land of outer Zhang-zhung, in the midst of g.Yung-drun mu-le, in the enclosure of the snow mountains, in a corner of Ma-pang g.yumtsho. Eighteen lesser castles for subduing the frontiers, 360 temples (gdung-rabs, contains shel-rtse; rGyal-ba bse shel-rtse; ‘Od-gsal g.yu-rtse; gSang-mer lha-rtse; Nyi’-od shel-rtse; rGyal-ba bse-mkhar; Ya-rad stag-mkhar Hah.co loz-mkhar...
The palace of Khyung-lung dngul-mkhar—which emerges as something between an architectural wonder and a sacred mountain—is described in terms of a site may provide the origin of its sacred character; however, it is equally true that once this sanctity has been established it may acquire a life of its own that survives its political base. We have already seen that the Iron-tressed Protector of mKha'-spyod continues to be worshipped in the kingdom of Lo even though the palace he protected, and whose existence his own surely did not precede, has lain in ruins for centuries.

The relationship between the political and spiritual relevance of a given territory is not simply a one-way affair, as recent studies of pilgrimage sites in south Asia and other regions have demonstrated. Temporal power may indeed provide a vehicle for religious interests, with the consequence that the denomination of a given site will change according to the proclivities of the ruling power. But, conversely, spiritual authority over key sacred sites may also be translated into political power. An example of this situation is furnished by Kulke’s study of the relationship between the Kurda kings and the Jagannatha temple of Puri in Orissa. The dynasty’s stewardship of the cult provided the kings with considerable political leverage in dealing with both allies and enemies (Kulke 1993).

The interaction between Bon and Zhang-zhung certainly suggests a relationship of mutual reinforcement. Whatever the historical links between the two, the annexation of Zhang-zhung and the assassination of its king during the expansion of the Tibetan empire left Bon without a sympathetic political base. Even if, as tradition has it, the religion of the Tibetan court was influenced by Bon-pos from Zhang-zhung, the later sponsorship of Buddhism by the rulers would have deprived Bon of vital patronage.

The Bon-pos’ debt to the old kingdom is partly expressed in the fulsome claims for the dimensions of Zhang-zhung’s territory that appear in Bon-po writings. Zhang-zhung may indeed have been very extensive, at least via a network of vassalage that it sustained through some parts of Central and Eastern Tibet (cf. Beckwith 1987); but to this already considerable territory the Tan’dzin rin-chen, the nineteenth-century author of the Ti se dkar chag (see below), adds Central Tibet in its entirety as well as Amdo, Khams and even China. The author’s motive in proposing such a vast territory is obviously not some retrospective patriotism for a polity that had vanished a thousand years earlier, but to glorify the success of the Bon religion that was believed to be coextensive with it.

The sanctity of places is not normally attributed to their erstwhile political relevance, although the gap between sacred and profane may be bridged by attributing divine qualities to the author of the temporal reign. In the case of Zhang-zhung, the enduring sanctity of its political centres is linked not to the Lig-mi kings or its other rulers (a list of whom is given in the Ti se dkar chag: see Norbu and Prats 1987: 71-73; 127-128), but to the activity of Bon-po saints and divinities in their vicinity. Khyung-lung dngul-mkhar is indeed attributed with supernatural qualities; the Zur-byung of Blo-Idan snying-po (b. 1360) remarks that “whoever meditates in the meditation place of Khyung-lung dngul-mkhar will be reborn in the ranks of the knowledge-holders” (178). But the power of the place derives from its association with luminaries such as Dran-pa nam-mkha’ and Gar-ma Me-slag-can (Norbu and Prats 1987: 61, 62).

The Disassociation of Political Sensibility

In certain cases, the temporal significance of a site may provide the origin of its sacred character; however, it is equally true that once this sanctity has been established it may acquire a life of its own that survives its political base. We
Spiritual Conquests

The sacred character of a place can, as we have seen, survive the worldly interest that underlay its creation. But the autonomy of the religious domain from the political one is of course even greater than that, to the extent that it has its own strategies for acquiring territory without riding on the back of a sympathetic military expansion. Claims to places are characteristically justified in the literature on the grounds of a saint or divinity visiting the sites in question and performing some miraculous act there. Such places are sometimes classified in sets according to a perceived similarity in the circumstances attending their conquest. The Bon tradition contains a number of such sets apart from the 37 ’du-gnas mentioned above. Among the most important is a group of 24 sites associated with the Mar-rgyud. The origin of the sites is attributed to the agency of Rang-rig gsang-mchog rgyal-po, the principal tutelary divinity of the Mar-rgyud.

...These are the places belonging to all 20 [24] [dakini] agents: the Nine Secret Places; the Four Wonderful Places; the Eight Fierce Places; the Three Tibetan Places, making 24 in all. The dakini-s of these great holy places, accompanied by their cohorts, have terrifying mask-like heads and hold curved swords and skull-cups. The colours of their bodies are white, yellow, green, red and dark blue. You and your followers, adorned with cemetery ornaments, receive these gtor-mal! Slaughter these obstructions, demons, malefic spirits and enemies for your feast! (Mar-rgyud, fol. 72a-72b).

The text then proceeds to enumerate the 24 sites. Each site is the location of a dakini with a theriomorphic head, and to the east, north, west and south are subsidiary sites occupied by similarly formed dakini-s, thereby creating a more extensive set of 120 places. The loci are sometimes defined by the name of the place and sometimes by the name of the dakini, so that it is not always clear whether the lesser sites did in fact ever have a recognized geographical location. In any event, since the list is long and I am unable to identify the majority of even the named places, two examples may suffice as an illustration. The list opens as follows:

bSwo! The five lion-headed dakini-s of g.Yu-lung shel-brag: [at the centre is] the dakini rGod-lcam of Nyl-ma ‘bar-bar; to the east is the dakini of rHa-ri del-dkar; to the north is the dakini of rGod-ri od-od; to the west is the dakini of nANG-srid ri-gzi-mdangs; to the south is the dakini of Tshal-rimdnun-sa. O five mothers of the great holy place of the gods, receive these gtor-mal! Slaughter these obstructions, demons, malefic spirits and enemies for your feast! (fols. 72a).

The sites in question are apparently located in and around the mythical mountain of ri-rab. The list of places extends beyond the Tibetan plateau to include adjacent countries: the sixth, the “Vat-shirted dakini of Mu-khun ri,” could refer either...
to certain places in Mugu, in north-west Nepal, that are periodically visited by Bon-po pilgrims from Dol-po, or possibly to Muktinath in Mustang (the old name for Dzong, the principal settlement in the Muktinath Valley, is Mu-kha). Other sites in Nepal include Swayambhūnāth, the home of the dākini of Bal-yul 'phags-pa, the southern representative of the hawk-headed dākini-s of Gyang-ma gyang-tho (fifteenth in the list), and Pharping.

China (the eighteenth), represented by the Owl-headed dākini-s, is followed by India:

The [five] crow-headed dākini-s of Sitavana in India: centre: the dākini of Ma-ga-da; east: the dākini of 'Gro-liding dar-ma; north: the dākini-s of Khri-gdan in Kashmir; west: the dākini-s of Uddiyāna; east: the dākini of Vārāṇasi... (76b-77a).

'Gro-liding dar-ma is said to be in or near north-east India; it is not clear to me whether "Khri-gdan in Kashmir" (Kha-che khri-gdan) has a precise recognized location. A number of these sites are included in a separate list of 24 places given in the Shel le rgya skar gyi rnam thar, a work by Blo-lidan snying-po (b. 1360) that will be discussed in more detail below. These are collectively referred to as the "24 holy places of the dākini-s, sacred mountains for excellent and ordinary practice" (mchog-thun bsgrub-pa'i gnas-ri). They are subdivided into three groups of eight: the mchog-thun tu grub-pa'i gnas bryag, the "eight places for supreme achievement" (or byang-chub sgrub-gnas bryag, the "eight places for meditation towards enlightenment"); the mchog-thun spel-ma bryag, the "eight places that combine supreme and ordinary achievements", and the thun-mongs mthun-rkyen bryag or mthun-rkyen sgrub-pa'i gnas bryag, the "eight places that help one to achieve worldly goals" (pp. 17-19). Unlike the set from the Ma-rgyud cited above these places are quite readily identifiable. The first group comprises sites in far-flung locations in sTag-gzig, Uddiyāna, South India and so forth (but also includes one site in Zhang-zhung), while the second and third are apparently confined to the Tibetan plateau and the Himalaya.

The Benefits of Sacred Places

Whatever circumstances are believed to be at the origin of sacred places, tradition has selected a certain number as being of particular importance as pilgrimage sites. It is frequently stated by Bon-pos that the three most significant sites are, in descending order of sanctity, Kong-po Bon-ri, Gangs Ti-se, and Shel-le rgyag-skar, and we shall return to this triad presently. However, more elaborate sets are also recognized. Perhaps the best known is a list of places contained in the Zur-byang of Blo-lidan snying-po. The context in which these places are enumerated is provided by the author receiving instructions from Triša-dbang rig-'dzin, who is "present in a secret body" (shas-pa'i skur-bzhugs p. 173). The master embarks on a discourse concerning the types of activities that are appropriate for the body, speech and mind in this degenerate age. The ideal occupation for the first of these is to "visit sacred places of spear-bearing" (gnas-kyi rgyal-po, and he proceeds to describe 20 such sites that are the "sovereign holy places" (gnas-kyi rgyal-po pp. 179-180). The name of each place is followed by a prescription of what one should do there, and a summary of the benefits one is likely to achieve. A few examples will suffice:

Whoever visits Ti-se, the ommphalos of the world, will achieve liberation after three lives; whoever drinks from the blue lake of Ma-pang g.yu-mtsho will purge the sins of his successive lives; if you spend a day on sPos-ri ngad-ldan in Zhang-zhung, you will achieve peace; whoever visits the supreme holy place of Khri-gdan in Kashmir will win liberation after four lives; ... if you make any offerings at Tsari, the dakinis' gathering place, you will achieve special powers; if you meditate on the benign and wrathful gods at Gyim-shod She-le rgyagar (sic.), you will achieve enlightenment in this life (pp. 177-178).

The list of places is followed by a variety of other bla-ret, such as "images of the buddhas in Lhasa" and the "self-originated Tso-mchog [mka'-'gying] of Khyung-po".

As we shall see below, the Zur-byang constitutes the single most important source for the Guide for the Blind, a recent guide to Bon-po holy places in Tibet.

Subjugation by Design

In referring earlier to the acquisition of territory as geographical outposts of a religion, the term "conquest" was used. In the absence of any obvious political involvement, what exactly is being conquered? The short answer is, Nature. We have already seen how popular tradition tends to render the landscape less "natural" by formalizing it in terms of stock images, such as seven vertical strata inhabited by appropriate animals. While genres such as folk songs and gser-skyems involve relatively mild distortions of the terrain, it is in the dkar-chag that we encounter the highest degree of elaboration. Elsewhere (Ramble 1997) I have drawn attention to the devices by which one dkar-chag imposes a sacred order on its subject, in this case, the Bon Mountain of Kong-po (Kong-po Bon-ri). The entire process is best understood in terms of the notion of subjugation (dul-bs), in which the hostile anarchy of nature is organized and brought into the service of the conquering religion. Thus topography is idealized in such a way that natural features (lakes, caves and so on) are disposed according to the quincunx pattern of a mandala; these and other features are counted in auspicious numbers; saints and luminaries leave the prints of their feet and other parts of their bodies in stone, and bury treasure at various points; rocks are given the likeness of various conventional images, and the wildlife is literally tame. The authority for the conquest of a site derives from revelation, which might itself attend the opening of the site, or else may reaffirm its inclusion within the territory of the religion.

While there is insufficient space here to undertake a serious examination of Bon-po dkar-chag, the available material might be organized in the following way.
Kong-po Bon-ri

The Bon-ri dkar-chag was probably written in 1844 by one g.Yung-drung phun-tshogs. A manuscript text that I obtained at the mountain itself in 1986 forms the basis of a study of the cumulative mythology that apparently led to the emergence of Bon-ri as a sacred site (Ramble 1997).

The political importance of Kong-po in early Tibetan history is attested to in a number of sources. It is likely that one lineage of rulers descended from Dri-gum continued to rule there after a parallel branch had established itself in Yarklungs. Kong-po came under the direct rule of the Yar-klungs branch only during the time of gNam-ras-slon-mtshan, the father of Srong-btsan sgam-po. The Kong-po inscription affirms certain rights of the rulers of rKong dkar-po—probably the area of Kong-po immediately north of the gTsang-po—under Srong-btsan sgam-po’s descendants, Srong-lde-btsan and lDe-srong. There are also good grounds for believing that the tomb of Dri-gum is situated not far from the confluence of the Nyag-chu and the gTsang-po in Kong-po (Richardson 1972 citing Bacot et al. 1940: 99; Karmay 1992). Bon-po tradition regards the historical association of Kong-po with the antecedents of the Yar-klungs Dynasty as being of secondary importance in establishing the religious significance of the place. The dkar-chag deals with the stories of Nyag-khi btsan-po and Dri-gum as belonging to a “later age”. The original sanctifying event was gShen-rab-mi-bo’s visit to the area on an expedition that had the secret agenda of expounding Bon teachings but was ostensibly concerned with the recovery of a number of horses stolen by a demon. This demon, Khyab-pa lag-ring, had taken refuge with the local ruler, rKong-rgya-dkar-po, whose citadel was located in Bre-sna. The historical rKong-rgya dkar-po was himself probably a descendant of Dri-gum, whose name which the author spells Da-mi in nam-mkha’s Commentary to Dpon-gsas Tha-mi thad-ka (a manuscript text that I obtained at the mountain itself in 1986 forms the basis of a study of the cumulative mythology that apparently led to the emergence of Bon-ri as a sacred site (Ramble 1997)).

The political importance of Kong-po, and especially Bre-sna, that may have contributed at least partly to the development of Bon-ri’s sanctity, has been eclipsed in the Bon-po tradition by the religious priorities of a mythic epoch. The visions experienced at Bon-ri by Ri-po “brug-gnas (who “opened” the mountain in 1330; see Kvearne 1971) and various other eminent meditators (summarized in the dkar-chag) enrich this sacred past through the revelation that they provide of earlier saintly visitors (Dran-pa nam-mkha’ and his sons, the Nine Scholars, Li-shu stag-ring and many others) who buried treasure, left footprints and otherwise contributed to Bon-ri’s greatness. Moreover, these visions all but obliterate the geographical individuality of Bon-ri by representing it in an idealized form, as a three-dimensional mandala, together with the various other transformations that have been described above (formalizations of numbers and shapes, and so forth).

Another important feature of this mandala building process is the deprivation of the autonomy of local divinities. To the south of the mountain is the shrine of a goddess who is locally revered as Bon-ri’s a-ma, the “Mother of Bon-ri”. Bon-ri’s a-ma is the lowest of a trio of divinities corresponding to a triadic partition of a vertical landscape. The dkar-chag, however, ignores this role and provides her with a new identity as the southern protector of Bon-ri, and with a different name, g.Yu’od sman-btsun. This is probably also true of various other place gods who have come to be regarded as satellite deities of the mountain.

Gangs Ti-se

The two Bon-po dkar-chag of Ti-se impose a similar type of morphological order on their subject. In these cases, too, the authority for this representation derives from revelation. The older—and shorter—of the two works is the Gangs ri ntsbo gsum gyi dkar-chag by one Ye-shes rgyal-mtshan (Dolanji 1973). He was one of the Bar-dar bstan-dzin mchog-bsten, a set of siddha’s who occupy an important position in the transmission of the Ma-rgyud, standing fourth in line after gYu-run Non-rtses, gNyag-ston gZhon-nu-bum and the “Two Meditators” (gSom-pa mam-gnyis). If gu-run Non-rtses was born in 1136 (Kvaerne 1971; see above), Ye-shes rgyal-mtshan probably lived in the thirteenth century, which surely makes this work one of the earliest known dkar-chag.

The author’s vision begins just after he had...

...bestowed initiations, teachings and precepts of the secret tantra of Me-rri ‘khyil-ba at the stupa known as the Ti-se, while giving some instructions concerning the Zhang zhung snyan rgyud, at twilight on the eleventh day of the sixth month in an Ox year (449-450).

A pathway of green light suddenly appears in front of him, and a youth standing on the path presents him with a white scarf and invites him to a mystic banquet. He sets off with the youth and takes his place at the head of the front row in the gathering. He is bidden by the royal priest (rgyal-gshen) Mu-khi-btsad-po to introduce himself, and after he has done so asks his hosts in turn to explain the nature of the place, its origins, the activities of the various saints who visited it, the benefits one might hope to gain from devotional acts, and so on. Mu-khi-btsad-po begins the commentary with the origin of Ti-se, which he says was originally called Gangs-gnyan, while giving some instructions concerning the Zhang zhung snyan rgyud, at twilight on the eleventh day of the sixth month in an Ox year (449-450).

It has the form of a crystal stupa seven and a half dpag-tshad (“miles”) high and a perimeter of seven-and-one-half rgyang-grags (“measures of earshot”); it has four doors of precious substances, and three circuits around it. dPon-gnas Tha-mi thad-ka (a name which the author spells Da-mi dad-khe/Tha-mi dad-khe: cf. the spelling Da-mi dad-ge in Dran-pa nam-mkha’s commentary to the mDrod-nyi’u mDrod...
Although there are a dozen or so commentators, the pace is brisk, and the mythology succinctly summarized. Pressed into just 23 folios, the work is almost terse compared with the later guide-book by dKar-ru Grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin rin-chen (b. 1801). Two versions of this account have been edited and published by Namkhai Norbu and Ramon Prats (1989). The date of the earlier one is given as 1844, and the later (first published in Dolanj in 1773) as 1847 (Norbu and Prats 1989: xxii). This account, the ‘Dzam gling gangs rgyal ti se’i dkar chag, is a tour de force of systematization. Following a description of the formation of the phenomenal world and the appearance of Ti-se, along with a list of 17 names by which it is known in various places, the work goes on to describe the features of its outer, inner and arcane circuits. These features—mountains, lakes, plants, forests, caves, streams, roads, cemeteries and various other natural and man-made sites—are organized in numerical sets, mainly of four, although other auspicious numbers, especially 13, also recur. Unlike Ye-shes rgyal-mtshan, bsTan-'dzin rin-chen does not preface his account with an invitation to a divine gathering, or put the catalogue of the mountain’s properties into the mouths of sages. The context of the work should probably be sought in a separate work, his Autobiography.

One of the earliest episodes in the Autobiography is a vision of Ti-se that bsTan-'dzin rin-chen claims to have had at the age of five, when the mountain is revealed to him in neatly schematic terms. The form is strict and quite elaborate, and it is perhaps surprising that the content of the vision is not incorporated into the dkar-chag. In this vision, he finds himself making offerings to the 33 gods on Mt. Meru, and thereafter observes that most of local phenomena are disposed in groups of 33. The divine palace itself is a relay of speakers, all more-or-less well-known Bon-po siddha-s, providing the answers he requires.

In this way a relay of speakers, all more-or-less well-known Bon-po siddha-s, provide Ye­shes rgyal-mtshan with the answers he requires.

Although there are at least 188 himself with Khri J eternal beings” (g.yung-drung sens­dpa). The context would seem to indicate that this version of the contest between Buddhists and Bon-pos is, forgers have invented and fabricated” their accounts (lnga pa bcos ma ruams kyis bcos shing bsgyur tshul bstan pa mi...) (86). The context would seem to indicate that this version of the contest between Buddhists and Bon-pos is,
like the story of Mi-la ras-pa (1040-1123), an account that the author has heard or read somewhere and is quoting with sceptical disapprobation.

bsTan-'dzin rin-chen’s remarks concerning the legendary conquest of Ti-se on behalf of Buddhism by Mi-la ras-pa are barbed, to say the least. The following is a summary list of episodes from the well-known story of Mi-la’s duel with Na-ro Bon-chung: the very occurrence of such a contest of magical skills; Mi-la straddling Ma-pang lake without increasing in size, or the lake diminishing; Mi-la lifting the lake on his fingertips; Na-ro falling from his drum in flight and being ridiculed by watching spirits; and Mi-la travelling to the peak of the mountain on a ray of light, among other events—“these are just a small part of a fabricated revisionist account” (92). As if to drive the point home, he follows this remark with a long list of further instances of the way in which Buddhists have perverted history by claiming, for example, that gGod-tshang-pa (1189-1258)4 opened the sacred mountain, and by changing the original Bon-po names and significances of places (93-94).

bsTan-'dzin rin-chen emphatically rejects the notion that Ti-se should be considered Buddhist territory, and he resumes his attack on the legend of Mi-la ras-pa in the sixth chapter:

Ordinary Buddhists say that this is a place that was won by that man called Mi-la ras-pa, and this is what they preach to credulous people. For a start, [Ti-se] appeared at the origin of this world age—Mi-la ras-pa certainly did not create it; and later (bar-du) in the good days, at the time when the Victorious gShen-rab was promulgating his teachings and bestowing his blessings, even the name “Mi-la ras-pa” was not around; and in a still later age, when the senior disciples were visiting the holy place and knowledge-holding yogis were meditating there, at the time when the lands of the 18 royal lines of Zhang-zhung were being founded, there was no one by the name of Mi-la ras-pa...

and so on for several pages of invective, with a dismissive biography of Mi-la ras-pa, slighting remarks about his vacuous songs and expressions of surprise that anyone could have been taken in by their author (98 ff.).

It may be noted that Ye-shes rgyal-mtshan’s earlier dkar-chag mentions Milarepa’s presence on Ti-se without any such polemic; but he was writing some two centuries before the offending biography and songs of Mi-la ras-pa had been compiled by gTsang-smyon He-ru-ka (1452-1507).

Mu-le-gangs

One of bsTan-'dzin rin-chen’s disciples was a certain bsTan-'dzin nying-ma from the Bon-po village of Lubra in southern Mustang. In addition to composing numerous devotional poems, bsTan-'dzin nying-ma was also the author of a dkar-chag of Mu-le-gangs, better known by its Nepali name of Dhaulagiri, the lower slopes of which lie within less than a day’s walk south of Lubra, on the west side of the Kali Gandaki. Although bsTan-'dzin nying-ma himself was a Bon-po, there

is practically nothing in the text to suggest that it is anything but a Buddhist work. The dkar-chag appears in a work entitled sNyigs dus kyi mtha’ byor ba bsTan-'dzin nying-ma’i gsung bu’i blo sbyong dang ’brel bu’i mgur ma. This work has been printed in India by the Tibetan Bon-po Monastic Centre, but the publication is unavailable to me. The text at my disposal is a copy I made from the original manuscript, kept in Lubra. The dkar-chag itself, entitled gNas chen nu le gangs dang gu ru gsang phug gi dkar chag [chags] kun snang gsal sgyor, covers fols. 16b to 30a. It bears a number of similarities to the more brief account of Gu-ru gsang-phug that has been translated by David Snellgrove (1979: 112-124). The latter work, by one sNgags-'chang tshe-ring, is undated, and it is not clear to me which of the two is older. Franz-Karl Ehrhard has kindly given me a slightly different version of bsTan-'dzin nying-ma’s dkar-chag, photographed in Dol-po. The text is apparently a copy of the Lubra original, and differs from it only slightly.

The particular site with which the dkar-chag is concerned, Gu-ru gsang-phug (“The Secret Cave of the Master”), is a cave on the eastern flanks of Mu-le-gangs that is locally revered as a site once inhabited by Padmasambhava, and bsTan-'dzin nying-ma does nothing to gainsay this belief. In the sylvan surroundings of his meditation place one day in a Water Pig year (1863), he sees a bright light and hears a voice speaking to him from a waterfall. The speaker introduces herself as the diki ini of the place and invites the hermit to a feast. She emerges from the water, bejewelled and robed in silk, and they set off. They reach Mu-le-gangs in an instant, and he observes that it looks different from the massif he is used to seeing. The sky is thick with parasols, victory banners, rainbows, buddhas, lamas, incense smoke, wheels and conches, and everywhere is a sound of bells, drums and the intonation of mantras. There are other inhabitants—serpent spirits, earth gods, zombies and so forth. The author remarks that, seen with inner vision, the mountain looks like Zangs-mdog dpal-ri, the abode of Padmasambhava.

The diki ini takes him in through an eastern door, and he sees a divine palace made of various precious substances. Among its many marvellous features, the palace has five lakes. In the central one is a Ge-sar lotus tree, and seated in the gigantic middle flower is Padmasambhava, accompanied by his wives and many attendants. The master casts bsTan-'dzin nying-ma a friendly smile, and the visitor in turn makes an imaginary six-fold offering. Padmasambhava addresses bsTan-'dzin nying-ma, and presents an apocalyptic description of conditions at the end of time when, among other things, Buddhist priests and Bon-pos will clash. But there are numerous sacred places that he has blessed: eight mountains, eight lakes, eight secret rock caves and eight great hidden valleys. The most exalted place is Mu-le-gangs, which is at the centre of these sets of eight major holy sites and 37 lesser locations. A short while later the diki ini leads him away from his audience and gives him a detailed commentary of the place, an orderly arrangement of treasures, footprints, divinities, relics and other sacred symbols worthy of the vision of his master bsTan-'dzin rin-chen.

This is followed by a description of a hidden land (skas-yul) that lies to the north of Mu-le-gangs, a place called Dung-lo lion-pa. This land has 500 villages, and gathers a harvest without planting; all its waters are like beer and milk, its
Monkey year of the twentieth cycle (A.D. 2172), when the circuit around mu-las-gangs will also be opened. The remainder of the work is a lengthy description of Gu-ru gsang-phug itself (24a ff.), its contents and surroundings and their disposition, and the benefits that one might accumulate from visiting the place. The account closes with the däkini telling him to keep his vision to himself for three months before spreading it abroad, and she melts away like a rainbow.

bSTän-'dzin nyi-ma’s dkar-chag effectively wins the mountain from the meaningless state of nature and transforms it into a sacred edifice where none of its natural features is devoid of significance: even the white birds on one of its lakes are sPyan-ras-gzigs himself (23a).

Khyung-po Ri-rtse-drug

The last dkar-chag of this sort that may be mentioned here is the guide to the Six-peaked mountain of Khyung-po by Blo-IDaan snyin-po (b. 1360). Two versions of this text, entitled simply Shel le rgya skar gyi rnam thar, are available to me. One is a recent production from the Tibetan Autonomous Region, comprising 19 folios of printed dbyu-can in dpe-chu form, and the second is a photocopy of a manuscript dpe-chu of uncertain provenance in cursive script. The differences between the two versions are too minor to be worth mentioning in this general survey (page references will be to the first version described here).

Here, too, the description of the place is based on revelation. One evening, the author dreams that he hears a sound and sees a ray of light from the southeast. On awakening, he sees in front of his door a red woman robed in silk, a-clatter with bone ornaments and riding an eagle. She invites him to a feast, and he realizes that he was not dreaming after all. In response to his inquiries, she introduces herself as the Yum-chen Nyi-ma ’Od-IDan-ma. He accompanies the feast is to be held in a cemetery at the six-fold exalted place (rdzong) of Shel-le rgya-skar, in Glang-gi gyim-shod in Sum-pa, under the presidency of Yum-chen Nyi-ma Od-IDan-ma. He accompanies the däkini to the venue, which is described in sumptuous detail, and after lengthy preliminaries, his hosts enlighten him about the nature of the place.

This sort of commentary does not lend itself readily to paraphrase, since an obvious aspect of its significance is the sheer quantification of wonders, meanings, resemblances, sacred properties, illustrious visitors and so forth; a massive accretion of unseen attributes that eclipses most of what is natural about the place, and turns its distinctive features into symbols of something else. The six peaks (rdzong) themselves are merely examples (dpe), that must be understood in terms of their meaning (don), which is the six perfections, and their signs (rtags), the six supreme and ordinary accomplishments (p. 20).

Embracing India

A number of the works considered above provide examples of Bon’s terrestrial sway being conceptually expanded by the identification of sacred sites in areas encountered in visions. By way of contrast with this model, it is worth giving some attention to the work of one Bon-po pilgrim who travelled to sacred places outside Tibet, and, on the basis of what he saw, staked a number of bold, if not startling, claims on behalf of his religion. The work in question is entitled rGyi ger gnas kyi [gyis] dkar chags dri med dwangs shel gyi mdo brsud, “The stainless pure crystal, a register of sacred places in India, and a brief travel guide”.

The colophon states that it was written by one rKyang-btsun sher-rnam (Shes-rab mam-rgyal?) se-da at the insistence of his two companions, rGyal-mtshan and bSam-pa, at Bya-rung kha-shor (Bodnath stüpa) in Kathmandu. No date is given. Bon-po monks living in Kathmandu knew something about this figure: he was from sGang-ru byang-ma in Khyung-po, and is believed to have died some time in the early 1960s.

I first heard about the author in southern Mustang. Older villagers remembered that he stayed in the Bon-po settlement of Lubra before and after his trip to India, probably in the mid-1940s; in fact, the author does state that he began his journey in nearby Muktinath. It seems that he spent some time in Lubra after his return to write out a fair copy of the draft he had completed in Kathmandu. Fortunately he left this draft in the village before departing for Tibet, and I was able to make a copy of it in 1982. It is written in dbyu-med and khjug on a set of folios bound in a red cloth cover to form a 26-page booklet.

The author was clearly influenced by the Bon gsar-ma movement, and the opening pages of his account name various Buddhist divinities who appear in his summary of unfolding world-ages. A brief description of world geography precedes a eulogy of the land of India, citing its sacred places, its diversity of flora and fauna—elephants, rhinoceroses, monkeys, snakes, various kinds of lotus and other flowers among other things—its fecundity and opulence. Shes-rab mam-rgyal was obviously awed by the whole place, and his perspective on the country is perhaps summed up in his observation that it is “a land of conjurors and aeroplanes.”

The journey begins on the twelfth page, when he sets off from Muktinath (sMug-ri-sna), carrying his pack, and reaches the Indian border apparently at Butwal (Bu-sdus-la) 20 days later. Shes-rab mam-rgyal is quite meticulous about noting the times at which he boarded trains, how long the journey took, and the length of time it requires to walk from one place to another; but it is apparent that he was barely able to communicate with anyone, and on a number of occasions seems not to have been quite sure where he was. For example, he takes the train from Gorakhpur and arrives at sunrise at Kasi Benares (rKang-shes sBis na ra-sil), a place where, he tells us, the Buddha successfully resisted the temptations of Mara. Four miles from here is “the place where the wheel of the doctrine was turned, called Saranath in Hindi and Varanasi in Tibetan” (p. 12).

There is insufficient space here to make a detailed examination of his itinerary and of the observations he records in this unfamiliar land, but awareness of his Bon-po identity was certainly never far from him. In Saranath he sees a bronze
image of one of the Buddha’s disciples, bearing a “beautiful letter A of the eternal
Bon system at its heart” (13).30
He sets off westward by train via Lucknow (Lags-na-ho), a city of fine gardens
and general prosperity, wanting nothing, that automatically bestows merit on
anyone who visits it (14). From there he goes on to Hardwar (Ha-ri zlos-gar), not
far to the north of which is Mount Ti-se, known in this part of the world as
“Kailash” (Ki-la-sris). After a brief visit to the city (rgyal-sa) of Dehradun (Ghu­
ru sDe-ra-’dun), a place blessed by Padmasambhava, he travels on to “rGya­
mkhar ba-chod, known as A-bar” (15).
We shall return in a moment to the significance of the name rGya-mkhar ba­chod. A-bar is Amritsar, and the focus of the writer’s interest is the Golden
Temple of the Sikhs, a building situated in the middle of the town, “standing
on the firm foundation of an island in a lake.” Engraved swastikas are displayed; it
has arched doors on each of its four faces and is set with a variety of precious
stones, too numerous for him to list by name. There are “omniscient horses
(cang-shes rta), conch-shell elephants and various other wild and domestic
animals, including golden fish in the water. And there is “not a hint of meat,
garlic, onion or tobacco smoke.” (sha chang rgog rtsong kha-du dri-ma bral) (16).
After describing the impressive appearance of the place at some length, the
commentary takes an interesting turn:

Their principal gShen is the Subduing gShen with the “bird-horns”. His
secret name is Guru Nanak. His teachings were the Bon of Relative
and Absolute Truth. He holds in his hand the Sword of Wisdom... This
place was established as a citadel for the life-force of the eternal [Bon]
tantras until such time as the future teacher should come. The essence
of the sect is the sphere of supreme Bon. These are the haunts of the
saints of the Supreme Secret Ma-rgyud. At this holy place the oceanic
assembly of the tutelary gods and buddhas, the divine community of
the nine tiered ways, gather like the clouds. On the fifteenth, thirtieth,
eight [and twenty-second of each month] and on the special days of
the Ma-rgyud, the right kind of people, faithful and endowed with
merit, may see the face and body of the Royal gShen himself (16) (16).
All this requires some explanation. What Shes-rab rnam-rgyal is suggesting
is that the Golden Temple of Amritsar is identical with rGya-mkhar ba-chod,
the palace built by Mi-lus bsam-legs, the Royal gShen who revealed the Ma­
rgyud.32 The basis of the association seems partly to be similarities in the
appearance of the Sikhs and the descriptions of certain ancient Bon-pos. Like
some of the latter, Sikhs are conspicuous for their beards and elaborate headgear.
One feature that the author specifically mentions is the presence of “bird-horns”
(bpa-ru). While these horns are a distinguishing feature of the 18 kings of Zhang­
zhung (Norbu and Prats 1987: 71-73; 127-128), they were also apparently
an insignium of early Bon priests.33 The corresponding item in the case of Guru
Nanak is undoubtedly the crescent horn-like motif of two crossed kirpan-s that
adorns the Sikh crest. The “sword of wisdom” is surely the kirpan itself,
Sikh apparel long after the time of the peaceable Nanak, under the aegis of more

Shortly after Amritsar, Shes-rab rnam-rgyal visits various holy places in and
near Kangra. One of these, an eight-mile trek from Jwalamukhi (a Hindu sacred
site near Kangra) where fire burns on earth and stone, is “Na-dis i kesar, known
as the mid-air sprite-stone”:

When the Royal gShen Mi-lus bsam-legs, who lived a long time ago, died ([lit. “united his mind with space”] after fulfilling the needs of
living things, all those whom he converted, without exception, passed
into a great rainbow body. Then the malign demons and sprites became
jealous; the demons hurled a rock at the Royal gShen and the sprites
threw a sword that turned in flight, but he made a magical gesture at
them with his index and little fingers, thereby preventing them from
falling. They are really there, even now, in mid-air (17).34

The conflict to which Shes-rab rnam-rgyal alludes is an episode in the tantra
where Mi-lus bsam-legs does battle with hostile dbil-kinis and demons in a place
called rGyal-ba mnyes-tsha1.35 A translation of this passage—without the
chronological liberties taken by Shes-rab rnam-rgyal—is given in Martin (1986:
44-46).36

Shes-rab rnam-rgyal continued on his travels in India. After Amritsar he
went up to Mandi, before descending to Delhi (18-9). He may—or perhaps he is
just describing the possibility—have gone to Bombay (Bha-ban); there is a big
ocean here, and if one travels across it in a ship (rgya-rtsi, i.e. jaház) for 25 days
one reaches “a place called Angrez, the land of a foreign king” (19). On his way
back he visited Bodh Gāyā, where there is a Chinese Bon-po monastery
(20), and eventually re-entered Nepal at Birganj (sbIr-kn-tsa) via Muzaffapur and
Raxaul (eled as Mang-jag pha-phor rgya-sur) (24).

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the popular association of Amritsar
with the Ma-rgyud tradition is not taken seriously by more scholarly Bon-pos.
When Slob-dpon Tenzin Namdak came to India as a refugee he visited Amritsar.
An English guide-book that he was later able to purchase contained enough
historical information about the Sikhs and their temple to confirm his doubts
(Tenzin Namdak, personal communication).

Transcending Place: The Guide for the Blind

Tenzin Namdak himself is the author of a work on Bon-po sacred places: Bod yul
to Tibetan Holy Places (1983). The work has a number of distinctive features that
are worth noting in the context of the literature that has been reviewed so far.

The Guide for the Blind is a fairly short work of just 54 pages, but it examines
in varying detail some 150 sacred places in the course of an itinerary that begins
from the Mountain of Kang-po passes westward through Lha-sa, gTsang, Nepal.
more northern route to take in Dang-ra and Nam-mtsho, then on to Khyung-po and A-mdo, eastern Khams and Wu-tai shan. The work is, among other things, an attempt to discipline the business of pilgrimage by instilling a certain rigour into the cult of sacred places. The introduction firmly establishes the status of pilgrimage in the hierarchy of religious activities. The highest form is represented by the practitioners of rDzogs-chen who spend their lives in lonely places. After them come the tantric adepts. Then, As it says in the Zur-byang, "to a diligent person of average intellect the Bon doctrine of the profound tantras are the teacher." If this does not apply to someone, how should he or she strive for virtue? There are those who adhere to the prātimokṣa vows of the pure sect of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan the Nonpareil—the second enlightened one who leads us forward—people who pass their lives in purifying their minds by hearing, pondering and meditating on his widely-diffused original teachings, who hold to these things and live in accordance with them. The Zur-byang tells us that “faithful people of lower intellect will be taught by the Bon doctrine of Disciplinary Law”. It goes on to talk about the way in which merit might be accumulated by those who are unable to undertake this kind of religious activity (bon-spyod), by means of the body, speech and mind as appropriate on the part of men and women with suitable virtue and faith: they should make prostrations to the triple supports with their bodies, pace around them, and make offerings; with their voices they should recite mantas and sing hymns of praise, and with their minds they should be faithful and devout and altruistic, as far as they can. According to the Zur-byang, “To lowly men and women, religious activities with the body, speech and mind will be the teacher.” And so people—men and women alike—who enter the path, in order to clear away the defilements of the three spheres of action, should with their bodies visit sources of blessings and places where saints have meditated, with their speech they should chant recitations or hymns of praise, and with their minds they should be faithful, reverent and well-intentioned. If they have a rough knowledge of the stories behind these triple supports, these holy mountains, and visit them, that is a powerful asset for increasing their faith and wishes (6-7).

The authority with which the Guide for the Blind establishes the authenticity of the sites it lists is not revelatory but historical, where historicity may be broadly understood as the content of texts that are regarded as reliable. The author has little time for local oral tradition unless it is substantiated by the right kind of literature. For example, one day’s walk from gNyen-chen zil-mngar, a site in Khyung-po associated with the Ma-rgyud,

On the subject of the caves in the Ti-se region, he remarks that although there is an abundance of places that are revered in the local folklore, “unless I have encountered them in the original sources I have not included them for either reverence or denigration” (42). The magical and spiritual properties of sacred sites are certainly catalogued, but rather briefly, and always in the form of quotations from other works. For example, “the Zur-byang of Blo-Idan says, “If you offer parasols of the five colours at Nepal’s Svayambhunāth, rebirth in the lower realms will be closed for you in your next life” (29-30). Similarly, the wonders of places such as Ti-se are presented as more or less lengthy extracts from dkar-chag and other reverential works.

This is not to say that the representation of sacred places is in any way comparable to the simplicity of “earlier”, more popular genres, that revere them as the habitations of local numina. The difference is clear in the concluding caveat:

When you walk around places such as the Bon Mountain of Kong-po, since they are receptacles that have been blessed by the Enlightened Teacher, you should imagine that, while performing your circuit, you are walking around the Enlightened One. It is not merely a matter of making prostrations and circumambulations while bearing in mind the local genii, territorial gods and swastikas of these places; whatever sacred receptacle you visit you should consider that it is this or that Enlightened One, and be reverent and rejoice. This is what is important (55).

Conclusion
The attempt made here to identify the variety of representations of sacred landscape in Tibetan literature is certainly highly simplified; there is a great deal of literature that has not been considered and, even within the scope of the material reviewed, a range of theoretical issues that have not been addressed. Nevertheless, the few examples dealt with here do make it possible to identify differences in attitudes to territory that suggest that Tibetan sacred geography is not a uniform field.

All sacred geography involves doing violence to nature by reorganizing it in ways that are congenial to human terms of reference. In the different examples we have considered it is not, of course, the landscape that varies but the terms of reference. Popular, mainly non-literary genres, as exemplified by songs (although folk-tales would also be worth examining) do not depart too radically from nature. The components of vertical space are not changed to, say, precious substances, but elevations are nonetheless formally tiered, and peopled with suitable, more-or-less natural fauna. Real political units, whether villages or kingdoms (as opposed to sbas-yul), do not change shape either. They are simply underlain by a network of supernatural entities whose prominence may reflect
least, the idea of Zhang-zhung. As the description of Khyung-lung dngul-mkhar and its satellites suggests, Zhang-zhung is believed to have provided the temporal platform that sustained Bon, and the political centres of Zhang-zhung are consequently also sacred centres of Bon.

Whatever the real historical relationship between these sites may have been, Bon survived while Zhang-zhung did not. Bon ceased to have a political base, and the subsequent examples examined illustrate the autonomous acquisition of land by a religion. The 24 sacred sites of the Ma-rgyud and the 37 “gathering places” are instances of territorial configurations devoid of any associated polity. The autonomy of sacred space from temporal authority reaches its most extreme development in the dkar-chag genre. Not only is polity irrelevant, but the natural landscape itself is all but annihilated by the mandala that is imposed, while autochthonous gods are brought into its service.

The last two works examined represent opposite sides of a watershed in literature on sacred geography. The rGya gar dkar chag is a peculiarly hybrid work, to the extent that it is a modern enterprise—a travelogue of a real land outside Tibet—that does not shed the conventions of traditional places. Such places as Lucknow can still not be described without the obligatory mention of magical streams that purify all defilements. Tenzin’s Namdak’s Guide for the Blind comes closer than any of the other works examined to effecting a separation between landscape and divinity. The work may be regarded as “modern” in the way that a European might consider, say, Locke or Hobbes to be modern. Where dkar-chag genre obliterates landscape, the Guide for the Blind rehabilitates it by partly detaching it from its supernatural associations. Divinity is no longer immanent in the land but transcendent, and the resulting separation produces two almost distinct fields of interest: on the one hand a quasi-secular historical geography and, on the other, a religious perspective in which propitiation gives way to soteriology, with nothing in between.

Notes

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1. We may note Large-Blondeau’s observation that “toute cette littérature est appelée au Tibet du nom général de dkar-chag, dont la traduction est ‘registre’, mais qui désigne en réalité les guides des lieux saints” (1960: 213).

2. A further extension may be made for studies related to the mythical land of ‘Ol-mo lung-ring, which has deservedly attracted attention among scholars because of its importance for Bon-po ideas about the origins of their religion. See, for example, Snellgrove (1967); Gumilev and Kuznetsov (1970); Karmay (1975); Martin (in this

A survey of the principle Bon-po sacred places is contained in Krystyna Czech’s unpublished doctoral thesis (1987), but unfortunately this work is presently unavailable to me for reference.

3. This is not to suggest that the dyad is the only cultural possibility in the attribution of gender to topographical features. The village of Kag, near Te, has a similar configuration of territorial gods. At the top is Pho-pha, in the middle is Pho-pha sde-lnga, and by the river is Chos-rgyal (or possibly Chu-rgyal?). Interestingly, Pho-pha is regarded as female, Chos-rgyal as male, and Pho-pha sde-lnga as their offspring. Numerous mountains in Tibet are female, and Toni Huber informs me that certain lakes are considered to be male.

4. The strange chorus that follows each strophe need not be given, since it would require lengthy explanation that is not relevant here. Similarly, the numerous intercalated syllables that have no literal meaning have been omitted with the exception of the penultimate line of the third line, which is necessary for the metre.

5. snamo’ yan stag sngan stod stod / ntho’ i dang nas sha ra ra / ’di la dga’ bai’i dar la seng // ntho’ la dang sngan stod stod / ntho’ i dang nas sha ra ra / ’di la dga’ bai’i bka’i la rgyod...

6. The feminine form may be used here and in the seventh stanza simply because it provides an extra syllable to meet the demands of the metre.

7. It may be noted that Wylie’s treatment of the subject of political geography addresses the matter of the historical dimensions of Tibet itself, and is not concerned with local territorial boundaries (Wylie 1965: 20-24).


This reading is a very free interpretation of the text (given in the following footnote), and the line counting may be noted. The guide could signify the major settlement of Gelung (usually spelt dGer-lung in texts), but as far as I have been able to determine there is no divinity called Ti-se or mtho’ yang stod located here (although there is a god named Tiwi). Moreover, for much of the last two centuries Gelung was not considered to be part of the kingdom of Lo. I have rendered mtho’ yang stod as Ti-se, since this is how the line is locally pronounced, and the orthography given here is not necessary authoritative: a gyur-skhyen text from a neighbouring settlement actually gives the spelling as Ti-se. The feminine form may be used here and in the seventh stanza simply because it provides an extra syllable to meet the demands of the metre.

9. Kang lung-gang could signify the major settlement of Gelung (usually spelt dGer-lung in texts), but as far as I have been able to determine there is no divinity called Ti-se or mtho’ yang stod located here (although there is a god named Tiwi). Moreover, for much of the last two centuries Gelung was not considered to be part of the kingdom of Lo. I have rendered mtho’ yang stod as Ti-se, since this is how the line is locally pronounced, and the orthography given here is not necessarily authoritative: a gyur-skhyen text from a neighbouring settlement actually gives the spelling as Ti-se. The feminine form may be used here and in the seventh stanza simply because it provides an extra syllable to meet the demands of the metre.

10. Klur ri shug po’i klu ma’ od dang ldan / gang lung gang dkar phu ne stegs kar / tshang khyen sum mdo’i sna ri dkar bstan po / ga ma bo phyug phyug [po] / bo bo bdud / big ching mkhar bstan / btsa drang cho rgyal dang / gar ger sten chen rnyams thos sras po...

11. Na yig bo skyang ger chen rnyams thos sras / _chus rdzong rgyal po san rdzong ma khris rgyal...
to certain places in Mugu, in north-west Nepal, that are periodically visited by Bon-po pilgrims from Dol-po, or possibly to Muktinath in Mustang (the old name for Dzong, the principal settlement in the Muktinath Valley, is Mu-kha). Other sites in Nepal include Swayambhunāth, the home of the dākini of Bal-yul phags-pa, the southern representative of the hawk-headed dākini-s of Gyang-ma gyantho (fifteenth in the list), and Pharping.

China (the eighteenth), represented by the Owl-headed dākini-s, is followed by India:

The five crow-headed dākini-s of Sitavana in India: centre: the dākini of Magadh; east: the dākini of ‘Gro-lung dar-ma; north: the dākini-s of Khri-gdan in Kashmir; west: the dākini-s of Uddiyāna; east: the dākini of Vārānasī... (76b-77a).

‘Gro-lung dar-ma is said to be in or near north-east India; it is not clear to me whether “Khri-gdan in Kashmir” (Kha-che khri-gdan) has a precise recognized location.18 A number of these sites are included in a separate list of 24 places given in the Shel le rgya skar gyi rnam thar, a work by Blo-idam snying-po (b. 1360) that will be discussed in more detail below. These are collectively referred to as the “24 holy places of the dākini-s, sacred mountains for excellent and ordinary practice” (mchog-thun bsgrub-pa’i gnas-ri). They are subdivided into three groups of eight: the mchog-tu grub-pa’i gnas bsgrub, the “eight places for supreme achievement” (or byang-chub sgrub-gnas bsgrub, the “eight places for meditation towards enlightenment”); the mchog-thun spel-ma bsgrub, the “eight places that combine supreme and ordinary achievements”, and the thun-mongs mthun-rkyen bsgrub or mthun-rkyen sgrub-pa’i gnas bsgrub, the “eight places that help one to achieve worldly goals” (pp. 17-19). Unlike the set from the Ma-rgyud cited above these places are quite readily identifiable. The first group comprises sites in far-flung locations in sTag-gzig, Uddiyāna, South India and so forth (but also includes one site in Zhang-zhung), while the second and third are apparently confined to the Tibetan plateau and the Himalaya.

The Benefits of Sacred Places

Whatever circumstances are believed to be at the origin of sacred places, tradition has selected a certain number as being of particular importance as pilgrimage sites. It is frequently stated by Bon-pos that the three most significant sites are, in descending order of sanctity, Kong-po Bon-ri, Gangs Ti-se, and Shel-le rgya-skar, and we shall return to this triad presently. However, more elaborate sets are also recognized. Perhaps the best known is a list of places contained in the Zur-byang of Blo-idam snying-po. The context in which these places are enumerated is provided by the author receiving instructions from Tshe-dbang rig’dzin, who is “present in a secret body” (sras-pa’i skur-bzugs p. 173). The master embarks on a discourse concerning the types of activities that are appropriate for the body, speech and mind in this degenerate age. The ideal occupation for the first of these is to “visit vital places of pilgrimage” (skyi'i bgrund-gnas mi’ja). And he proceeds to describe 20 such sites that are the “sovereign holy places” (gna-smas rgyal-po pp. 179-180). The name of each place is followed by a prescription of what one should do there, and a summary of the benefits one is likely to achieve. A few examples will suffice:

Whoever visits Ti-se, the omphalos of the world, will achieve liberation after three lives; whoever drinks from the blue lake of Ma-pang gyum-tsho will purify the sins of his successive lives; if you spend a day on sPos-ri ngad-idan in Zhang-zhung, you will achieve peace; whoever visits the supreme holy place of Khri-gdan in Kashmir will win liberation after four lives; if you make any offerings to Ts’ai-rī, the dakinis’ gathering place, you will achieve special powers; if you meditate on the benign and wrathful gods at Gyim-shod She-le rgyagar (sic.), you will achieve enlightenment in this life (pp. 177-178).

The list of places is followed by a variety of other bia-tos, such as “images of the buddhas in Lhasa” and the “self-originated Tso-mchog [mkhar’i-gying] of Khyung-po”.

As we shall see below, the Zur-byang constitutes the single most important source for the Guide for the Blind, a recent guide to Bon-po holy places in Tibet.

Subjugation by Design

In referring earlier to the acquisition of territory as geographical outposts of a religion, the term “conquest” was used. In the absence of any obvious political involvement, what exactly is being conquered? The short answer is, Nature. We have already seen how popular tradition tends to render the landscape less “natural” by formalizing it in terms of stock images, such as seven vertical strata inhabited by appropriate animals. While genres such as folksongs and gser-skyesn involve relatively mild distortions of the terrain, it is in the dkar-chag that we encounter the highest degree of elaboration. Elsewhere (Ramble 1997) I have drawn attention to the devices by which one dkar-chag imposes a sacred order on its subject, in this case, the Bon Mountain of Kong-po (Kong-po Bon-ri). The entire process is best understood in terms of the notion of subjugation (dul-bi), in which the hostile anarchy of nature is organized and brought into the service of the conquering religion. Thus topography is idealized in such a way that natural features (lakes, caves and so on) are disposed according to the quincunx pattern of a mandala; these and other features are counted in auspicious numbers; saints and luminaries leave the prints of their feet and other parts of their bodies in stone, and bury treasure at various points; rocks are given the likeness of various conventional images, and the wildlife is literally tamed. The authority for the conquest of a site derives from revelation, which might itself attend the opening of the site, or else may reaffirm its inclusion within the territory of the religion.

While there is insufficient space here to undertake a serious examination of Bon-po dkar-chags, the available material might be employed to illustrate the