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AVALOKITEŚVARA IN DUNHUANG AND TIBET: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BODHISATTVA'S TIBETAN CULT (WITH A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE *MA ṆI BKA' 'BUM*)

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AVALOKITEŚVARA IN DUNHUANG AND TIBET: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BODHISATTVA'S TIBETAN CULT, (WITH A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE *MA ṆI BKA' 'BUM*)*

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Abstract

The period in which the famous Tibetan cult of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs) took shape remains disputed. Some have sought his cult's incipience towards the end of the second millennium or even at the dusk of the Tibetan Empire (ca. 7th c. to 842, Tib. Bod chen po), while others consider it the fruit of religious developments during Tibet's so-called later propagation of Buddhism (from the late 10th/early 11th c. onward, Tib. *phyi dar*). This paper illuminates the matter by studying the textual history of two highly influential early Tibetan sources concerning this bodhisattva, the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* [Collected Works on the *Maṇi* (*Mantra*)] and the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* [Pillar Testament]. Diachronic analyses of these two works are important topics in their own right, yet also illuminate the growth of the distinctively Tibetan mythology that would come to surround Avalokiteśvara. In a bid to further draw out historical developments, findings from these two sources are presented in combination with Tibetan Dunhuang (敦煌) documents and Tibetan Plateau sources from the period of the later propagation of Buddhism in Tibet. This combined survey provides a more fine-grained view of Avalokiteśvara's unparalleled rise in Tibetan religion. In the process, the article rewrites our understanding of the history of the *Collected Works on the Maṇi* (*Mantra*), while also developing new insights into the rise to prominence of the six-syllable *mantra Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*, Avalokiteśvara's growing roles in Tibetan history, as well as his relation to Amitābha/Amitāyus.

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1. *Introduction*

The spread of the bodhisattva Avalokita/Avalokiteśvara through Asia presents a compelling tale of transcultural transmission. Absorbing Śaiva influences in the Indian subcontinent, becoming female in China, and rising to cultural paramountcy in Tibet, the evolution of this bodhisattva's cult tells a story of decisive interest not only to the history of religion, but of Asia at large. Nowhere in the vast stretches of the Buddhist world, however, did Avalokiteśvara achieve greater standing than on the Tibetan Plateau, where he would come to be embraced as the region's patron deity, as the true identity of the Tibetan Empire's revered early-seventh-century ruler, and even as the very ancestor of the Tibetan people.

One of Avalokiteśvara's *mantra*s, the six-syllabled *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*, would attain such eminence in the Tibetan highlands that it nearly became synonymous with the country so devoted to it. In the 15th century, a Tibetan author reported that "the sound of the *maṇi*," a reference to the *mantra*, "spontaneously resounds from the mouths of everyone, from small children on up, grown men and women, along with renunciants."[1] In the 18th century, the Buddhist master and historiographer Sumpa Khenpo (1704–1788, Tib. Sum pa mkhan po) noted in a similar vein that Avalokiteśvara's special relationship with the Tibetans was "even easier to comprehend than for a small child to spontaneously recite the *maṇi*."[2] Foreigners agreed. A German explorer who travelled in Tibet in the 1920s titled his best-selling book after the *mantra*, declaring it to constitute the most-recited and most-copied syllables in the world.[3]

Yet when did this centrality of Avalokiteśvara and his famous *mantra* come about? Some scholars of Tibet have suggested that the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult may have developed early at a grass-roots level, gathering critical weight in the period between the Tibetan Empire's fall in the mid-ninth century and the so-called later propagation of Buddhism

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[1] 'Gos lo Gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po* [Blue Annals], vol. 2 (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984), 1173: [...] *bu chung yan chod/ skyes pa dang bud med/ rab tu byung ba dang bcas pa thams cad kyi kha nas ma ṇi'i sgra rang grag pa 'di yin no/*.

[2] Sum pa Ye shes dpal 'byor, *Chos 'byung dpag bsam ljon bzang* [The Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree, a History of the Dharma] (Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992), 288: *bod thugs rje chen po'i gdul bya yin par byis pa chung ngus kyang ngam shugs kyis ma ṇi 'don pa las kyang shes sla'o/*.

[3] Wilhelm Filchner, *Om mani padme hum: Meine China- und Tibetexpedition 1925/28* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1943 [1929]), vi.

(from the late 10th/early 11th c. onward, Tib. *phyi dar*), before bursting onto the pages of historical records during the latter period. They have pointed to so-called treasure texts or *terma* (Tib. *gter ma*) from the early second millennium such as the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* [Pillar Testament] and the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* [Collected Works on the Maṇi (Mantra)], henceforth MKB, to demonstrate the presence of an already full-fledged Avalokiteśvara tradition during this period. In this scenario, a popular cult, already in existence, simply found lasting written expression in the 11th and 12th centuries.[4]

There is some support for this reconstruction. Tibetan-language documents retrieved from Dunhuang (敦煌), mostly from the tenth century, already evince Avalokiteśvara's substantial popularity there.[5] The art of Dunhuang similarly reflects the bodhisattva's prominence.[6] Jonathan Silk has recently identified large literal overlaps between Dunhuang manuscripts and the first chapter of the MKB's chief historiography,[7] hinting at the old age of that collection's source materials. Van Schaik has hypothesised that the centrality of the six-syllable *mantra*, which he first sees evinced in the *Pillar Testament* and the MKB, may have arisen early and "outside of the textual tradition",[8] sustaining the notion that established popular traditions may have fed into these early-

[4] Per Sørensen, for one, has suggested that "[c]ore narrative parts of the original" mythology of the *Pillar Testament* and that of the MKB, too, may date back to the late Tibetan imperial period (ca. 600–850). See Per 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* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 640 and 643.

[5] Sam van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult in the Tenth Century: Evidence from the Dunhuang Manuscripts," in *Tibetan Buddhist Literature and Praxis: Studies in its Formative Period 900–1400*, ed. Ronald Davidson and Christian Wedemeyer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 55–72. For some notes on the apparent influence of Dunhuang's Chinese Buddhists on the Avalokiteśvara cult of Turfan, see Yukiyo Kasai, "The Avalokiteśvara Cult in Turfan and Dunhuang in the Pre-Mongolian Period," in *Buddhism in Central Asia II: Practices and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer*, ed. Yukiyo Kasai and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 244–269.

[6] See, for instance, Henrik Sørensen, "Typology and Iconography in the Esoteric Art of Dunhuang," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 2 (1991): 285–349, and Imre Galambos, "Avalokiteśvara and the Longing to Return Home: Stein Painting 3 from Dunhuang," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 4.4 (2022).

[7] Jonathan Silk, "A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem Praising Amitāba and its Rebirth Among the *Gter ma*," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 64 (2022): 516–613.

[8] Van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult," 66–69.

second-millennium treasure texts. These ideas fit with the growing appreciation for treasure literature's reuse of older literature.[9] Mere decades after Mogao Cave 17, a.k.a. the Dunhuang Library Cave or 'scripture repository cave' was sealed, moreover, the missionary Atiśa/Adhīśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982–1054, Tib. A ti sha Mar me mdzad dpal Ye shes) reportedly disseminated teachings on Avalokiteśvara on the Tibetan Plateau, including ones concentrating on his six-syllable form. His biographies suggest the bodhisattva featured prominently in his religious practice,[10] and tradition even credits him with having retrieved the *Pillar*

[9] See for example, Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa from Dunhuang* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008); Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, *A Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis: A Mahāyoga Tantra and its Commentary* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012); Robert Mayer, "*gTer ston* and Tradent: Innovation and Conservation in Tibetan Treasure Literature," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2015): 227–242; Cathy Cantwell (with Robert Mayer), *Dudjom Rinpoche's Vajrakilāya Works: A Study in Authoring, Compiling, and Editing Texts in the Tibetan Revelatory Tradition* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2020).

[10] Atiśa's later biographies attribute several Avalokiteśvara-related works to him, either as author or translator (Helmut Eimer, *Rnam thar rgyas pa: Materialien zu einer Biographie des Atiśa (Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna)*, Vol. 2: *Textmaterialien* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), lemmata 268, 375, 376, 377). Some canonical collections claim that the brief *sādhana* (Tib. *sgrub thabs*, lit. 'means of achievement') *'Phags pa yi ge drug pa'i sgrub thabs* (e.g., Derge 2853), dedicated to Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable form, was co-translated by Atiśa. An identically titled and closely related work, however, with a largely verbatim text, is billed as his *own* composition in different canonical collections (e.g., Narthang 3628).

Atiśa's biographies also identify Mahākāruṇika as his personal meditational deity (Tib. *yi dam*, Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*) (ibid., lemmata 138, 157, 328), and he is said to have had multiple visions of different forms of Avalokiteśvara (ibid., lemmata 157, 328, 375, 405). He was reportedly responsible for directing the religious attention of Dromtönpa Gyelwé Jungné (ca. 1005–1064, Tib. 'Brom ston pa rGyal ba'i 'byung gnas), the trailblazer of the Kadam (Tib. *bka' gdams*) tradition, to Avalokiteśvara's eleven-faced form and his six-syllable *mantra* (or form) (ibid., lemma 293).

Yet all such references should be weighed against the great number of other *sādhana*s and works Atiśa reportedly translated and composed, as well as the fact that these biographies are not coeval with Atiśa himself and therefore may have been influenced by the Avalokiteśvara cult's rising tide. A reference to Tibet's location as Avalokiteśvara's '(Buddha) field' (Tib. *zhing khams*) and a realm of activity for Tārā (Tib. sGrol ma) (ibid., lemma 157), as well as another reference to Songtsen Gampo (ca. 605–649, Tib. Srong btsan sgam po, alias Khri Srong rtsan), as an emanation of Mahākāruṇika (ibid., lemma 198) are potential symptoms of such influence, perhaps mediated through the *Pillar Testament*. Matthew Kapstein already pointed out that consulted works by Atiśa and other somewhat later masters with a focus on Avalokiteśvara do not contain explicit notions of

Testament, which forwards a history of pre-imperial and early imperial Tibet centered on Avalokiteśvara's intervening agency.

Other scholars, in contrast, have suggested later timelines for the development of Avalokiteśvara's full-fledged cult in Tibet, arguing that it only formed in the early centuries of the second millennium. Blondeau highlighted the major contribution by the discoverers of the MKB.[11] Kapstein did so too, arguing that the "key elements" of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult "achieved their definite articulation within the *Maṇi Kambum*", whose contents he dates to between 1150 and 1250.[12] Following a different line of inquiry, Phillips arrived at a similar timeframe, especially highlighting Avalokiteśvara's popularisation by the 13th-century Guru Chökyi Wangchug (1212–1270, Tib. Gu ru Chos kyi dbang phyug).[13] Yet others have stressed the contributions of the Kadam tradition.[14]

To better assess the accuracy of these two proposed chronologies we would be well-advised to engage in more detail with the pivotal Avalokiteśvara works from the early second millennium, the MKB and the *Pillar Testament*. Their content and textual history hold important keys to understanding how Avalokiteśvara's mythology developed over time. Due to the rather poorly studied history of these works, this text-historical research takes up a substantial portion of the article, especially for the MKB. Findings on the *Pillar Testament*'s history have recently been published elsewhere,[15] and provide a base on which this article builds.

The structure of this paper, though stretched, is straightforward. First, in order to establish a comparative baseline of Avalokiteśvara's cult, I present some Dunhuang materials that touch upon the bodhisattva

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any intimate ties between Avalokiteśvara and Tibet. See Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 148.

[11] Anne-Marie Blondeau, "Religions tibétaines," *L'annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études* (1977): 85.

[12] Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 145–147.

[13] Bradford Phillips, "Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet: The *Maṇi bka'-'bum chen-mo* of Guru Chos-kyi dbang-phyug," PhD diss. (University of Virginia, 2004), chapter 3 and pp. 343–346.

[14] See for example, Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 252.

[15] Reinier Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar of Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: On the Redactions of the So-called "Pillar Testament" (*Bka' chems ka khol ma*)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 87.3 (2024).

(chapter 2). This is followed by diachronic analyses of the MKB (chapter 3.1) and the *Pillar Testament* (chapter 3.2), which provide enhanced views of which elements of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult appeared around what time, and in what order. Finally, in the conclusion (chapter 4), I will also consider other Tibetan Plateau sources from the early second millennium to buttress our revised understanding of the rise of Avalokiteśvara's Tibetan mythology.

2. *Avalokiteśvara in Dunhuang*

Avalokiteśvara features in a variety of written documents recovered from Dunhuang. His presence in post-mortuary ritual works, for one, has long been noted.[16] One relevant composition among these is the *Lha yul du lam bstan pa* [Showing the Way to the Land of the Gods], which proclaims the salvific power of invoking Avalokiteśvara, said to release beings from hell.[17] The *Dug gsum 'dul ba* [Overcoming the Three Poisons] is a similar work in that it seeks to replace non-Buddhist post-mortuary ritual with Buddhist methods instead, which include the recitation of an Avalokiteśvara *mantra* claimed to subdue delusion.[18] In these texts, however, the bodhisattva features as a peer among equals: in order to be released from the realm of hungry ghosts (Tib. *yi d*(*w*)*ags*, Skt. *preta*), for instance, one should turn to the bodhisattva Gaganagañja (Tib. Nam mkha' mdzod) instead.[19]

Among the Dunhuang materials, Avalokiteśvara commanded more substantial devotion in other types of written Tibetan materials. He is

[16] E.g., Marcelle Lalou, "A Tun-huang Prelude to the Karaṇḍavyūha," *The Indian Historical Quarterly* 14 (1938): 398–400; Rolf Stein, "Un document ancien relatif aux rites funéraires des Bon-po tibétains," *Journal Asiatique* 257 (1970): 155–185; Yoshiro Imaeda, "Note préliminaire sur la formule *oṁ maṇi padme hūṁ* dans les manuscrits tibétains de Touen-Houang," in *Contributions aux études sur Touen-houang*, ed. M. Soymié (Geneva and Paris: Librairie Droz, 1979), 71–76; Ariane Macdonald, "Une lecture des Pelliot tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047, et 1290: Essai sur la formation et l'emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Sroṅ-bcan sgam-po," in *Études tibétaines dédiées a la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou* (Paris: Libraire d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve, 1971), 373ff.

[17] P. T. 37, fol. 11r, l. 3–fol. 11v, l. 2; P. T. 239, fol. 4r, l. 4–fol. 4v, l. 3.

[18] Imaeda, "Note préliminaire," 74.

[19] E.g., P. T. 37, fol. 12r, l. 6–fol. 12v, l. 6 (which spells the bodhisattva's name as Nam ka mdzod).

particularly well-represented in *dhāraṇī* (Tib. *gzungs*) literature and is the object of praise in 21 manuscripts of hymns, while appearing in prominent roles in some *sūtra* and *sādhana* manuscripts, too.[20] What is more, it appears that other scriptures focused on Avalokiteśvara were translated in Dunhuang (or at least that wider Central Eastern Asian region) as well, even if no manuscripts of these texts were subsequently preserved in the library cave. One such work is the *sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug yid bzhin 'khor lo sgyur ba'i gzungs* [The Dhāraṇī that Turns the Wishfulfilling Wheel of Avalokiteśvara], translated from Chinese by the famous 9th-century Sino-Tibetan translator Gö Chödrup (d. ca. 864, Tib. 'Gos Chos grub, Chin. Wu Facheng 吳法成),[21] who was active in Dunhuang and Ganzhou.[22]

Another scripture, identified by van Schaik as "the single most common Tibetan Avalokiteśvara text in the Dunhuang collections",[23] would be repeatedly invoked in a central work of the MKB, the *Lo rgyus chen mo* [Great History], as one of the chief 21 scriptural sources concerning Avalokiteśvara.[24] It would also be directly cited there.[25] A later Buddhist canon preserves no less than three witnesses of it, perhaps a testament to its popularity.[26] The 11th-century Atiśa is also associated with this scripture, as a biography of his credits him with once having translated it.[27] This scripture is titled *'Phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug gi mtshan brgya rtsa brgyad pa* [The 108 Epithets of Ārya Avalokiteśvara] (Skt. *Āryāvalokiteśvaranāmāṣṭaśataka*) and details the benefits of praising the bodhisattva, both in this life and the next:

[20] Van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult."

[21] See Channa Li, "A Survey of Tibetan *Sūtras* Translated from Chinese, as Recorded in Early Tibetan Catalogues," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 60 (2021): 195. Cf. with the list in van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult," 69–70. Van Schaik (ibid., 71, appendix III) does wonder whether this *dhāraṇī* might be fragmentarily attested in P. T. 370, yet a cursory comparison of the latter with a canonical witness (Derge 692) does not bear out this hunch.

[22] On Chödrup's activities and geography, see Channa Li, "Toward a History of Chödrup's (fl. First Half of 9th C., Tib. Chos grub, Chin. Facheng 法成) Monastic Activities: An Introduction and a Working Chronology," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 1.3 (2024).

[23] Van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult," 60.

[24] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 43r, l. 2, fol. 79r, ll. 5–6; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 85.6–86.1, fol. 156.4.

[25] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 88v, l. 6–fol. 89r, l. 6; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 177.3–fol. 178.3.

[26] Derge 705, Derge 706, Derge 900.

[27] Eimer, *Rnam thar*, 318, lemma 376.

> He who praises Ārya Avalokiteśvara by means of his 108 epithets, even his defilement from the *karma* of the five acts with immediate retribution will be completely cleansed. He will enter all the *maṇḍala*s. He will realise all *mantra*s. For the duration of a thousand eons, he shall not be reborn in bad realms. He shall not go to the Avīci [hell] [(Tib. *mnar med*)].
>
> Whoever gets up in the morning and reads, or has [somebody else] read, or recites [Avalokiteśvara's 108 names], his body will be liberated from all [of the following]: leprosy, abscesses, lung disease, and breathing difficulties. He will remember all his births, too, his succession of lives. He will come to be like a *devaputra* [(Tib. *lha'i bu*)]. At that moment in time when he dies, he shall be reborn in the world realm of Sukhāvatī [(Tib. *bde ba can*)]. Wherever or as whatever he is reborn, he will not be separated from Ārya Avalokiteśvara.[28]

Another scripture that made the rounds in Dunhuang is chapter 24 of the famous *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* [Lotus Sūtra] (P. T. 572). This chapter focuses on Avalokiteśvara and details how the bodhisattva appears in myriad different forms to assist beings. It too contains potential seeds of the Tibetan mythology, such as its scriptural precedent for the notion that the bodhisattva appears in the form of a Wheel-Turning King (Skt. *cakravartin*) to benefit beings. That section of the scripture was, in any case, cited in the MKB's *Great History*,[29] and the *sūtra* is also adduced as scriptural authority in the preface to one of the more archaic extant redactions of the *Pillar Testament*.[30]

Some other scriptures cited, referred to, or potentially relied upon in the MKB's *Great History* ultimately derive from Dunhuang, too. These works

[28] P. T. 107, fols 12.4–13.1 (for variant readings see P. T. 24, P. T. 110, Derge 706, and Derge 900): */'phags pa spyan ras gzigs gyi dbang phyug la mtshan brgya rtsa brgyad kyis gang gyis bstod par byed pa de/ /mtshams myed pa lnga byas pa'i las gyis bsgribs pa yang yongs su byang bar 'gyur/ /dkyil 'khor thams cad du zhugs par 'gyur/ /sngags thams cad kyang grub par 'gyur / /bskal pa stong gi bar du ngan 'gror myi skye/ /mnar myed par myi 'gro/ /su zhig nang par langs te/ klog 'am/ klog du 'jug 'am/ kha don du 'don na de 'i lus la 'dze dang shu ba dang/ glo na ba dang/ dbugs myi bde* [*b*]*a thams cad las kyang thar par 'gyur / /skye 'o chog kyang*(?) *tshe rabs dran par 'gyur / /lha 'i bu dang 'dra bar 'gyur / /'chi ba'i dus gyi tshe yang 'jig rten gyi 'khams bde ba can du skye 'o/ /gar skyes gang skyes kyang 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs gyi dbang phyug dang myi 'bral bar 'gyur ro/.*

[29] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 84r, l. 1–fol. 86v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fols 167.3–172.3.

[30] Anon., "Chos brgyal sprong btsan sgan po'i bka' chems [The Testament of the Dharma King Songtsen the Wise]", in *The Literary Arts in Ladakh: A Reproduction of a Collection of Bhotia Manuscripts on Poetics, Prosody, Sanskrit Grammar, Lexicography, etc. from the Library of the Former Ruling Family*, ed. Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang (Darjeeling, 1972), vol. 1 [henceforth *Pillar Testament D*], fol. 364.4. For more information on the recensional variety of this work, see Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar."

include the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* [Dhāraṇī of [Avalokiteśvara] with a Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes], the *Zhal bcu gcig pa'i rig sngags kyi snying po* [The Essence of the *Vidyā Mantra* of the Eleven-faced (Avalokiteśvara)], and, perhaps, the *Spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug yid bzhin 'khor lo sgyur ba'i gzungs* and the *mDzangs blun gyi mdo* [Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish], all of which were translated by the aforementioned Chödrup.[31] This would indeed seem to demonstrate a degree of continuity between ninth- and tenth-century Tibetan-language

[31] Li, "Translated from Chinese," 185–89, table 1. What is initially adduced as the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi mdo* (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 85.1) is the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* (Derge 691, Derge 897); the *gDong bcu gcig pa'i mdo* [Sūtra of the Eleven-Faced One] (f. 85.3) appears to refer to the *Zhal bcu gcig pa'i rig sngags kyi snying po* (Derge 694), and the *dBang phyug 'khor lo'i mdo* [Sūtra of Īśvara's Wheel] (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 85.4) might refer to the *sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug yid bzhin 'khor lo sgyur ba'i gzungs* (Derge 692). These three (abbreviated) titles are listed among the so-called '21 *sūtra*s and *tantra*s' (Tib. *mdo rgyud nyer gcig*) associated with Avalokiteśvara, which are repeatedly referred to in the *Lo rgyus chen mo* and other Tibetan works alike.

The *mDzangs blun gyi mdo* (Derge 341), which is neither part of the group of 21 scriptures nor adduced or cited explicitly in the *Lo rgyus chen mo*, may nevertheless have been the ultimate inspiration for its chapter 31. This chapter gives a new spin to the story of Aṅgulimāla (Tib. Sor mo phreng ba), this tale likely having been mediated through a text attributed to Nyang-rel Nyima Özer (1124–1192, Tib. Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer) that was similarly included in the MKB (see 3.1.3).

Due to a variety of reasons, the exact identifications of the 21 scriptures mentioned and cited or paraphrased in the *Lo rgyus chen mo* are often tricky. The adduced titles, firstly, may be unusual and/or inconsistent across both different passages and witnesses. Secondly, the citations/paraphrases are typically quite free in form and might ultimately even rely on non-canonical witnesses of works, if they can ultimately be traced back to any scripture at all. A paraphrase from the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, for instance, is adduced under a title that should likely be read as *mTshan rabs yongs su bstan pa'i mdo* [Sūtra that Expounds a Succession of [Teachers'] Names] (var. *mTshan rabs bdun yongs su bstan pa'i mdo* [MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 156.4–5], *mTshan ras yongs su rdzogs pa'i mdo* [MKB *K*, *mdo skor*, fol. 84v, ll. 6–7], etc.), and presents the scripture's content in an order that deviates from the narrative as preserved in the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* as preserved in the Derge canon (Derge 44). Complicating matters yet further, some *sūtra* citations circulated independently, being quoted indirectly across a variety of works, creating further space in which their form may have come to deviate.

I have touched on some of these issues in a lecture entitled "Sūtra in Early Buddhist Treasure Texts" (presented in the Fourth Series of the "Treasure Seminar Series," Wolfson College, University of Oxford, May 8, 2023), and, together with Channa Li, in our talk "The 21 Avalokiteśvara Scriptures in the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum*: One Thread in the Fabric of Tibetan Buddhist Kingship Myths" (presented at the monthly colloquium of the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Dec. 5, 2023). Channa Li and I are planning to delve into the 21 scriptures in more detail in the near future.

sources from Dunhuang and the Avalokiteśvara cult known from the Tibetan Plateau of later centuries.

However, what we do *not* find among these sources from Dunhuang, be they *sūtra*, *dhāraṇī*, praises, ritual guides or other, is the notion that Avalokiteśvara pays particular attention to Tibet, or that he emanated as its king, or that he was involved in the Tibetans' genesis. Nor do we, for that matter, encounter the *mantra Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*. Although closely related *mantra*s do appear,[32] none of these in fact have six syllables, which is of course the quintessence of 'the six-syllabled one' (Skt. *ṣadakṣarī*, Tib. *yi ge drug ma*/*pa*) as famously promoted in the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*.

In sum, then, although Avalokiteśvara clearly did enjoy cultic standing in Tibetan-language circles in the Dunhuang region, defining elements of the later Tibetan tradition would appear to have been altogether alien to Dunhuang's religious culture as reflected in the library cave documents. The pivotal question, still, is why this should be so. Is this rift an artefact of the distance separating this Silk Road station from the Tibetan heartlands, or did the cult as we know it simply not yet exist when the library cave at Dunhuang was walled off in the early 11th century?

3. *Avalokiteśvara in Tibet*

When we compare Dunhuang materials with Tibetan Plateau texts that supposedly date to the early centuries of the second millennium, including one work supposedly from the mid-11th century—mere decades after the Dunhuang library cave's closure—sizable disconnects emerge. In extant witnesses of the *Pillar Testament* and the MKB collection, we do not merely find a generic reverence for Avalokiteśvara, but a mythology centered on him, in which he outshines any and all other bodhisattvas and takes up a central role in Tibetan soteriological, cultural, and political history. Functioning at once as patron deity, culture hero, king, and sometimes even ancestor, his six-syllable mantra also starts making its appearance, suffusing the pages of the MKB in particular.

[32] Imaeda, "Note préliminaire," 73. To help explain the six-syllable *mantra*'s absence from Dunhuang, van Schaik submits that "wandering religious preachers" may have promoted the *mantra* inside Tibet during the ninth and tenth centuries. See van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult," 67–68.

Yet the textual histories of both these pivotal works have not been addressed in great detail. This state of affairs ensures that we are not on solid ground when we rely on any one witness of these two works as reflective of early second-millennium religious developments. Indeed, as we crack open the internal chronology of these works, we shall realise that certain elements of Avalokiteśvara's cult and mythology, commonly believed to be attested in early redactions of these works, may actually be developments from still later centuries.

3.1. *The* Collected Works on the Ma ṇi (Mantra) *(*Ma ṇi bka' 'bum*)*

The MKB, the so-called *Collected Works on the Ma ṇi (Mantra)*, is a large heterogeneous collection focused on Avalokiteśvara and his six-syllable *mantra* and has garnered fame as a textual cornerstone of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult. Its materials, attributed to the seventh-century emperor Songtsen Gampo, are so heavily centered on the *mantra Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ* that the latter decisively informs the structure of some of its works, occasionally warps its adduced source materials, and would even come to star in the collection's title.

The collection has generally been divided into three core sections, each of which cover a different type of content. These are: (1) the *sūtra* cycle (Tib. *mdo skor*), largely made up of narrative works and historiographies that detail the exploits of Songtsen Gampo and Avalokiteśvara, (2) the *sādhana* cycle (Tib. *sgrub skor*), which contains practice materials, and (3) the advice cycle (Tib. *zhal gdams kyi skor*), filled with spiritual counsel. This trio of cycles was retrieved sometime between 1150 and 1250 by three treasure revealers named Shākya Zangpo (fl. 13th c., Tib. Shākya bzang po), Druptop Ngödrup (fl. 12th c., Tib. Grub thob dNgos grub), and Nyang-rel Nyima Özer (1124–1192, Tib. Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer).[33] Or so the story goes.

In actual fact, the history of the MKB proves rather more difficult to flesh out. As already noted, the collection is of substantial size and diverse in content, making its exhaustive study challenging. Even within

[33] E.g., Franz-Karl Ehrhard, "The Royal Print of the *Maṇi bka' 'bum*: Its Catalogue and Colophon," in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra Maurer (Andiast: IITBS, 2013), vol. 1, 207–208; Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 145–146; Sørensen, *Historiography*, 643.

individual cycles there is notable doctrinal variation.[34] It has also been suggested that portions of the collection have been emended with additional works over time, and that its historical make-up has therefore varied.[35] Lastly, the collection was block-printed multiple times during the latter half of the second millennium,[36] likely erasing much text-historical evidence of a more fluid handwritten past.

In the following pages, I will paint a fresh picture of the collection's history by drawing on both block prints and heretofore unstudied manuscript evidence. First, I will demonstrate the historical fluctuation of the collection's make-up (3.1.1). I will then demonstrate that the degree to which 12th-century figures such as Ngödrup and Nyang-rel were involved in its genesis is likely far more limited than previously assumed (3.1.2), which has repercussions for the dating of many of the collection's works. Finally, I will discuss the ramifications of this revised understanding of the collection's chronology for how we understand and can study the development of Tibet's Avalokiteśvara cult (3.1.3).

3.1.1. *The Collections's Historical Structure*

Both block prints and manuscripts of the MKB provide important evidence on fluctuations in the collection's make-up over time. In an important article, Ehrhard has illustrated that the collection was first printed in 1521 in Mangyül Gunthang (Tib. Mang yul gung thang). This 'royal print,' which I will refer to as R, had a lasting impact on the collection's form. It "provided the master copy ... for all the later reprints of the collection" and, Ehrhard adds, "underlay the final codification of the individual texts".[37] The collection having first been printed in 1521

[34] Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 153; Sørensen, *Historiography*, 585.

[35] Michael Aris, Bhutan, *The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1979), 8–12; Ariane Macdonald, "Histoire et philologie tibétaines," *L'annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études*, 4e section, Sciences historiques et philologiques (1968/69), 529–530.

[36] Ehrhard, "Royal Print."

[37] Ibid., 152. Minor changes were however certainly made between block prints. These concerned, for instance, issues of spelling, the shifting of an editorial note (cf. MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 97r, l.6–fol. 97r, l.1 & MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 617.2), or the insertion of an additional heading in the Derge (Tib. sDe dge) print (Ehrhard, "Royal Print," 149, n. 13). In one instance, moreover, a missing scriptural citation was inserted (compare MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 84r, l. 1 with MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fols 165.5–67.3, see fn. 156 for manuscript witnesses). Marta Sernesi has also discussed the relations and differences between MKB xylographs ('Reprinting the Buddhist Classics: On the Production and Circulation of Blockprints,' in

means that if we accept the traditional narrative of the collection's origins, the entirety of the MKB would have circulated solely in manuscript form for over two-and-a-half centuries, and its earliest portions some three-and-a-half centuries. To date, however, available manuscripts have hardly been consulted, leaving fresh and potentially valuable evidence out of the equation.

Some of the handwritten witnesses of the collection I have inspected[38] indeed offer highly relevant insights. These manuscripts often have poor

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Tibetan Manuscript and Xylograph Traditions: The Written Word and its Media within the Tibetan Culture Sphere, edited by Orna Almogi (Hamburg, Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies, Universität Hamburg), 278–286). Another previously reported disagreement between a narrative passage in the Derge print and block print MKB *P* (Lewis Doney, "A Yak, Na rak and Potalaka: Folios of the So-called "*Gyalpo Kachem*" in US Museum Collections," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 55 (2020): 88, n. 34) is rooted in a misalignment of these two witnesses. (The parallel chapter break of MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 6r, l. 2–3 is found not in the Derge block print's vol. *waṃ*, fol. 199b4, but rather that same volume's fol. 5r, ll. 2–3, where the sequence of content in fact agrees with *P*).

[38] I have looked, in greatly varying levels of depth, at some two dozen different witnesses of (portions of) the MKB. For this article, I chiefly relied on the manuscripts *K*, *O*, *L*, and *T* and the block prints *R* and *P*. Because my witness of *R* is fragmentary, I often refer to *P* in its stead.

The complete list of consulted witnesses includes (partial) witnesses on eighteen microfilms produced by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP), which I, for the greater part, inspected swiftly on a four-day visit to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin in January of 2023. Three additional microfilms, including two I had prioritised for inspection, were unfortunately unavailable during my visit (E 603, E 658, E 827). All in all, my search in the library yielded five heretofore largely unstudied manuscript witnesses of (portions of) the MKB among the available NGMPP microfilms (on reels AT 114, L 13, L 312, L 419 and E 1278).

Quick inspections of familiar passages suggested that MKB *K* (L 419, from Kodari), was most promising text-historically. My digital reproduction of this manuscript, which is in a swift cursive script and uses many abbreviations, is unfortunately of poor quality, leaving many passages and even title pages illegible. This could be ameliorated to a degree by notes and pictures I took while in Berlin.

I also repeatedly refer to another manuscript, MKB *O*, filmed by the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) of the British Library. MKB *O* is preserved at the Central Bhutanese monastery of Orgyen Chöling (Tib. O rgyan Chos gling), a seat of Longchenpa (1308–63, Tib. Klong chen pa) and Dorje Lingpa (1346–1405, Tib. rDo rje gling pa). It is freely accessible online through the EAP website, which incorrectly attributes the collection to Péma Lingpa (1450–1521, Tib. Padma gling pa).

I occasionally use witness MKB *L* (NGMPP L 13/3, from Langtang), which is a partial *umé* (Tib. *dbu med*, lit. headless) manuscript of the collection, containing only the *Lo rgyus chen mo* (in section *kha*). I also refer to MKB *T* (NGMPP L 312, documented at Tupten Chöling [Tib. Thub bstan chos gling]), an *uchen* (Tib. *dbu can*, lit. headed) manuscript.

spelling or corrupt readings, yet they occasionally preserve readings that appear older than those in the block prints,[39] even if the textual variation appears to be limited overall. Most important in the present context, however, is the insight that these surviving manuscripts can provide into the historical structure of the collection as a whole.

Even the block prints themselves already offer indications that the selection of works included in the collection was subject to revision. Aris and Ehrhard have already drawn attention to several relevant passages,[40]

Swift discrimination deemed AT 114 and E 1278 less worthy of attention, even though the former contains an interesting additional work (*infra*).

On a concluding note, ten of the eighteen available NGMPP films turned out to reflect block prints, not manuscripts. Preliminarily grouped according to edition, these are: [AT 35/4-5, E 1981/2-3 and E 2479/4], [E 2331, E 2933–2934, L 62], [L 118], [L 974/1], [E 1823/1-2] (the exact grouping needs further inspection, as some of the early prints from Western Tibet are very similar, see Sernesi, "Reprinting the Buddhist Classics"). Another microfilm was a lithograph (E 3004/13). Two other reels I inspected in the hopes of finding additional witnesses turned out not to contain the MKB at all (L 284, L 839).

[39] For instance, some of the handwritten witnesses lack portions of the longer text found in the catalogue (Tib. *dkar chag*) familiar from the block prints (*infra*). In another example, a versified passage in the *Lo rgyus chen mo* has two additional lines in the text found in the block prints (compare the xylographs MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 73v, l. 2 and MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 145.2 with the manuscripts MKB *K*, *mdo skor*, fol. 78r, l. 2, MKB *O*, *kha*, fol. 58v, l. 2, MKB *L*, fol. 57v, l. 2; though it should be noted that the additional lines are not exclusive to the xylographs, see the manuscript MKB *T*, fol. 76v, l. 2). The possibility that manuscripts accidentally elided these two lines can be ruled out with a fair degree of confidence because the verses are attested in numerous other works where the two lines are similarly absent. These other works include the *mDzad pa rnam thar* [Life Stories (of Songtsen's) Deeds] within witnesses of the MKB itself (e.g., *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 196.4), the *Me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* [Honey Essence, the Heart of Flowers] (Meisezahl, *Die Große Geschichte des tibetischen Buddhismus nach alter Tradition: rÑiṅ ma'i čhos 'byuṅ čhen mo: Faksimile-Edition der Berliner Handschrift (Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, HS. or. 1640)* (Augustin: VGH Wissenschafsverlag, 1985), plate 106.1.4), a largely unstudied treasure text with some archaic orthographic features titled *rGyal po'i bka' chems* [The King's Testament] (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, NGMPP L 1173/4, fol. 21v, l. 2), a treasure cycle by Ogyen Rinchen Lingpa (b. 1323, Tib. O rgyan Rin chen gling pa) (*Chos skyong ba'i rgyal po srong btsan sgam po'i rnam thar* [Life Story of the Dharma-Protecting King Songtsen the Wise], digital reproduction in *Tshe ring bla mas nyar tshags mdzad pa'i dpe rnying dpe dkon* [Old and Rare Texts in the Keeping of Tsering Lama] (TBRC W4PD1207), vol. 82 (*zu*), cycle 2, fol. 3v, l. 2), another work centered on the lives of Songtsen Gampo and his Chinese and Newari wives (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, NGMPP L 839/3, fol. 19.4–19.6), and the *Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu* [The Wish-fulfilling Jewel, a Treasury of Explanations] (Don dam smra ba'i seng ge, *A 15th Century Compendium of Knowledge: The Bśad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu*, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: Sharada Rani, 1969), fol. 92.5).

[40] Aris, *Bhutan*, 8–12; Ehrhard, "Royal Print," 147–149.

yet these bear repeating here for further analysis. In the earliest block print's catalogue, a gloss follows the titles of three works that supposedly constitute the first section, the *sūtra* cycle. This gloss lists additional content said to be part of that same cycle:

> Although this is not clear in the treasure's inventory [(Tib. *kha byang*)],[41] [the following works] are [also] counted among the sections of the *sūtra* cycle and are sure to be the words of the Dharma King Songtsen the Wise. The *Me tog rgyan pa'i zhing bkod* [Array of (Buddha) Fields Adorned with Flowers], the *Bka' chems 'thon 'thing ma* [Blue Testament], the *rGyal bu'i 'jig rten dbang phyug gi skyes rabs* [Jātaka of Prince Lokeśvara], the *rGyal po'i mdzad pa nyi shu rtsa gcig pa* [Twenty-one Deeds of the King], and the *Pillar Testament* [also] belong to the *sūtra* cycle.[42]

This passage, printed in small letters, is surely an editorial insertion, as Ehrhard already suggested.[43] Manuscripts confirm this. The note is absent from at least two handwritten witnesses of the collection,[44] and its novelty is similarly evident from the fact that it is not repeated when its broader context is cited elsewhere in the block prints.[45]

Obviously, then, at some point editors widened the acceptable range of the collection, expanding it beyond the material outlined in what they must have seen as the original table of contents, "the treasure's inventory." Two of the additional works listed in the note above were indeed included in *R* (the *Jātaka of Prince Lokeśvara* and the *Twenty-One Deeds of the King*), although the three remaining titles were evidently unavailable and could be slated only for future inclusion.

Another such insertion, again absent from at least two manuscripts,[46] is found a little further down in *R*'s catalogue: "Because these [various listed

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[41] A *kha byang* is a prophetic guide, inventory, or index to a treasure text. As is demonstrated below, the MKB's *kha byang* would be absorbed into the more elaborate 'catalogue' or 'table of contents' (Tib. *dkar chag*) (as familiar from the block prints), in which not only glosses but also entire passages would be added. See especially 3.1.2.

[42] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 6r, ll- 3–5: //*gter gyi kha byang na gsal kha mi 'dug kyang* / *mdo bskor gyi le tshan la the zhing* / *chos rgyal bsrong btsan rgam po'i bka' yin nges la me tog rgyan pa'i zhing bkod*/ *bka' chems 'thon 'thing ma*/ *rgyal bu'i 'jig rten dbang phyug gi skyes rabs*/ *rgyal po'i mdzad pa nyi shu rtsa gcig pa*/ *bka' chems ka bkol ma rnams mdo bskor la the'o*// (some spelling variants are found in MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 11.1–11.2).

[43] Ehrhard, "Royal Print," 147.

[44] MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 4r, l. 2; MKB *T*, *ka*, fol. 6r, ll. 3–4. Note that other manuscripts do include the addition, e.g., MKB *O*, *ka*, fol. 2v, ll. 2–4.

[45] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 97r, l. 6–fol. 97v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 617.2.

[46] MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 4v, l. 5; MKB *T*, *ka*, fol. 10v, l. 5.

works] are the indisputable pronouncements of the Dharma King Songtsen, they belong to the advice cycle."[47]

Here again the received table of contents was augmented with additional works. Directly after, we read of two more works that ought to be added in the future:

> Moreover, because the two [compositions titled] the *Yer pa'i dkar chag* [Yer pa Catalogue] and the *rGyal pos gshin la phan gdags pa'i le'u drug pa* [Six-Chapter [Work] on the King Benefiting the Dead] are of a type that belongs to the advice cycle, [these works] are to be inserted at whatever juncture is appropriate.[48]

Elsewhere, editors noted: "Because no exemplars of these [works] were found, if they are found [at some point in the future], they are to be inserted here."[49] Another note documents that the editors went to some lengths looking for specific works in various manuscript witnesses, yet came up empty:

> […] although it would be fitting for [two scriptures] to be present here, they do not appear among the *Collected Work*s currently available in Ngari [(Tib. mNga' ris)] […][50]

And again: "We did not find the *Lokeśvarasādhana*."[51]

These notes make it abundantly clear that the accessible collections circulating in manuscript form in the early 16th century deviated in myriad ways from what the editors imagined the full collection to look like. Yet what, then, was the full collection?

The editors are fortunately quite explicit about the touchstone for any work's incorporation. The relevant criterion is neither its affiliation with the aforementioned trio of treasure revealers (Tib. *gter ston*), nor its

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[47] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_{1}$r, l. 6–fol. 10v, l. 1: *'di rnams chos rgyal bsrong btsan rgam po'i bka' rtsod med du 'dug pas zhal gdams kyi bskor la the'o*/ (see also MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 19.3–19.4).

[48] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_{1}$r, l. 1: /*bzhan yang yer pa'i dkar chag dang* / *rgyal pos gshin la phan gdags pa'i le'u drug pa 'di gnyis*/ *zhal gdams kyi bskor la the ba'i rigs su 'dug pas mtshams gang 'os cig tu gzhug par bya'o*// (see also MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 19.4).

[49] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 617.1: /*de rnams kyi phyi mo ma rnyed pas*/ *rnyed na mtshams 'dir gzhug par bya'o*//.

[50] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 97v, ll. 1–2: *skabs 'dir … bzhugs par rigs na'ang* / *da lta mnga' ris na bzhugs pa'i bka' 'bum rnams na mi snang bas*/ (see also MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 617.3).

[51] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 595.6: /*'jig rten dbang phyug gi sgrub thabs ma rnyed do*/.

appearance on a canonical list of contents. Rather, the decisive factor was the work's author: compositions that are "the indisputable pronouncements of the Dharma King Songtsen" or "are sure to be the words of the Dharma King Songtsen the Wise" can, and should be, included. The *complete* collection, therefore, was an abstraction, a project in the making: a basket to be filled with any composition credibly attributable to this emperor of old.[52]

This open nature of the collection explains why the catalogue (Tib. *dkar chag*) common to all block prints could argue for the inclusion of a work such as the *Pillar Testament*. That work, traditionally believed to have been retrieved by the 11th-century Atiśa, is completely detached from the MKB's supposed inception with the three treasure revealers Ngödrup, Nyang-rel, and Shākya Zangpo, who not only postdate Atiśa more than a century, but are also affiliated with rather different Buddhist lineages.

Importantly, the editors' willingness to embrace anything composed by Songtsen followed in the footsteps of the manuscript tradition. Not only did the hands behind *R* use and peruse manuscripts, but some of the changes evident in the block prints' tables of contents were not, it seems, initiated by their editors. The extension of the *sūtra* cycle with other works, for one, is similarly evident in manuscript *O*, which itself is not based on a block print.[53] Manuscript *K* was not copied from a xylograph either yet includes additional works beyond those described in its own overview of contents. The block prints' willingness to absorb additional works certainly did not pose a break with the manuscript tradition.

Indeed, many witnesses's title pages—in manuscripts and block prints alike—signal a similarly inclusive editorial stance (*R*, *P*, *O*, *T*, etc.). Time and again, the selected heading is not *Collected Works on the Maṇi (Mantra)*, but rather the *Collected Works of the Dharma-protecting King*

[52] For a discussion of open canons and canonicity in Buddhism more generally, see Jonathan Silk, "Canonicity," in *Brill's Enyclopedia of Buddhism: Volume I: Literature and Languages*, ed. Jonathan Silk, Oskar von Hinüber and Vincent Eltschinger (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), 5–37.

[53] MKB *O*'s independence from the block prints is evinced by its omission of the final portion of the block prints' catalogues (see 3.1.2), as well as by its description of the *Lo rgyus chen mo* as having 41 chapters, rather than 36, an incongruency in the manuscripts that the block prints remarked upon (e.g., MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 6r, l. 2; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 11.3).

Songtsen the Wise.[54] This numerically dominant and surely earlier title[55] has repeatedly been pointed out, yet its implications for the nature of the collection have not been fully appreciated. The title signals a willingness to absorb any work credited to Songtsen and should therefore serve as a warning of the collection's malleability. A still more inclusive editorial attitude emanates from the title *Thugs rje chen po'i bka' 'bum* [Collected Works of/relating to Mahākāruṇika] that marks the inventory of manuscript *K*.[56]

With the editorial mindset being that of a collector, the passage of time would have ensured that witnesses of the MKB started diverging from one another. It is even conceivable that wholly separate 'Collected Works' of the king were compiled at different places and, at some point, cross-fertilised, or that some eventually dropped out of circulation. Variation would surely have had great potential with as misty an author as Emperor Songtsen, a figure untethered to any single institution, and works attributed to whom kept being revealed across centuries. This long trajectory would have provided plentiful opportunity for the faithful to add further works should they turn up.

And add works they did. We find notable variation in the actual contents of different witnesses of the collection. Below, I provide an overview of four separate constellations of the collection's opening sources that are grouped together as the *sūtra* cycle.[57] This outline

[54] In the spelling of MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 1r: *chos skyong ba'i rgyal po bsrong btsan rgam po'i bka' 'bum*.

[55] Kapstein notes that the title *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* had become wide-spread by the 17th c., though its origins remain unclear (Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 147, 262, n. 41). Both he (*loc. cit.*) and Phillips ("Consummation," 294–296) speculate on the phrase's possible origins in the biographical traditions of Guru Chöwang (1212–1270, Tib. Gu ru Chos kyi dbang phyug), an issue that requires further study, which should certainly address the dating of Phillips' source material.

[56] *thugs rje chen po'i bka' 'bum skor {gsum} kyi kha byang bzhugs//* (MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 1r). Interestingly, such a broad framing of the collection may explain why the 'inventory' (or the 'catalogue,' depending on the edition) also lists content such as Avalokiteśvara-centered scripture that was clearly not originally composed by Songtsen (or even in Tibetan), such as the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* and the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs*. For a possible explanation of why these two scriptures in particular were included, see fn. 72.

[57] Owing to my broader research focus and time constraints, my investigations have concentrated on this cycle. A future study of the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* ought to build on this by comparing the exact contents of witnesses across all cycles and seek to incorporate manuscript evidence from the Tibetan Plateau as well. My initial impression is that the

demonstrates the meager overlap between the contents given in the main text of the widely disseminated catalogue,[58] the actual works in an MKB manuscript from Bhutan (*O*), those in the collection's earliest block print (*R*), as well as the content overview provided by an unknown author in his/her 'list [of teachings] received' (Tib. *thob yig*):

	Main text of catalogue (MKB *R*)	MKB *O*	MKB *R*	List of teachings received[59]
1	*Lo rgyus chen mo* [Great History]	*Lo rgyus chen mo*	*Lo rgyus chen mo*	*Lo rgyus chen mo*
2	*Za ma tog bkod pa* [Kāraṇḍavyūha]	*bKa' chems mtho mding ma* [Blue Testament]	*mDzad pa rnam thar* [Life Stories (of Songtsen's) Deeds]	*rGyal po'i skyes rabs ma ṇi'i phan yon dang bcas pa le'u bcu*[ ]*g*[*ny*]*i*[*s*] *pa*[60] [The King's Jātaka, together with the Benefits of the *Maṇi* (*Mantra*), in Twelve Chapters]

advice and *sādhana* cycles varied less in their contents than the *sūtra* cycle, but this awaits confirmation.

[58] What I refer to as "the main text" excludes the gloss translated above on p. 17, which was added later on.

[59] The relevant section of this list of teachings received, which remains of unidentified authorship, can be found in *dPe rnying rtsa chen bris ma'i skor phyogs bsdus* [A Collection of Sets of Valuable Old Hand-written Texts], vol. *ha*, images 262–265 (see https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW2PD19899, last accessed May 14, 2024). In the outline provided by BDRC, it is that volume's second text to be catalogued as *Ma Ni bka' 'bum gyi thob yig* [List of received [teachings] relating to the Collected Works on the *Maṇi* (*Mantra*)] (9 fols, relevant section: fols 1v–3r, l. 5).

[60] The Tibetan is ambiguously abbreviated: *le'u bcui pa* (fol. 3r, l. 2), which should presumably be read as *le'u bcu* [*gny*]*i*[*s*] *pa*, "with twelve chapters," rather than *le'u bcu* [*gc*]*i*[*g*] *pa*, "with eleven chapters." Due to this number of chapters (whether twelve or eleven), the work cannot be identified with either the *mDzad pa rnam thar* or the *mDzad pa nyi shu rtsa gcig pa* [On the Twenty-One Deeds].

3	*Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* [Dhāraṇī of Avalokiteśvara with a Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes]	*'Jig rten dbang phyug gi 'khrungs rabs* [Jātaka of [Prince] Lokeśvara]	*rGyal bu 'jig rten dbang phyug gi skye rabs* [Jātaka of Prince Lokeśvara]	*rNam thar mtho mthing ma le'u bcu bdun ma* [= Blue Testament]
4	–	*rGyal po'i bka' chems ras sa 'phrul snang gyis dkar chag*[61] [= Pillar Testament]	*mDzad pa nyi shu rtsa gcig pa* [Twenty-one Deeds (of the King)]	*rGyal po 'jig rten dbang phyug gi 'khrungs rabs le'u nyer gcig pa* [Jātaka of King Lokeśvara in Twenty-one Chapters]
5	–	–	–	*rGyal po'i mya ngan 'das chung rgyud pa'i gsol 'debs* [Prayer to the Lineage(-holders) of the King's *Lesser Nirvāṇa*]
6	–	–	–	*dGe slong dpal mos mdzad pa'i bstod pa 'jigs rten mgon po* [Lokanātha, a Praise Composed by the bhikṣuṇī Lakṣmīṅkarā] [62]

Table 1. Comparison of the reported contents of the first cycle of the *Collected Works on the Maṇi (Mantra)*'s first cycle (titles are unamended, scribal abbreviations dissolved).

[61] Note that this work, another heretofore unknown witness of the *Pillar Testament*, is attached at the end of the collection. Because MKB *O*'s table of contents however assigns it to the *sūtra* cycle, I do so too. This witness was discovered too late to be included in my previous research on the *Pillar Testament* (Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar").

[62] The fact that this work was not even purportedly written by Songtsen again illustrates the malleable boundaries of the collection.

These lists feature eleven unique works in total, but only a single one of those, the *Great History*,[63] is found on all four lists. Each list also contains works that are unique to itself. Manuscript *K*, to add a fifth witness, includes the sources of *R*, albeit incompletely and in a different order,[64] and, for further contrast, adds a work of its own as well (the *Rgyal po yab yum yid la thim tshul* [How the Union of King and Consort Dissolved into Awareness], see *K*, *yab yuṃ*, in 22 fols).[65] This variation also highlights the important fact that unstudied witnesses of MKBs may hold rare sources not found in parallel collections, or indeed anywhere else. It was within the pages of one such micro-filmed collection that Per Sørensen found the sole known witness of the *bKa' chems mtho' mthing ma* [The Blue Testament] (NGMPP AT 114/5).[66] His find can now be supplemented with two further manuscripts, tripling the known number of

[63] Questions remain concerning the textual history of this work. Although all witnesses of the *Lo rgyus chen mo* familiar to me have 36 chapters, a gloss in the block prints' catalogue notes that prior overviews claimed it had 41 (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 6r, ll. 2–3; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 11.1 and 11.3), as certain manuscripts indeed continue to claim (e.g., MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 2r, l. 1; *O*, *ka*, fol. 2v, l. 2). The manuscript of the *Yar lung chos 'byung* [Dharma History of Yarlung] at my disposal, furthermore, claims it had 44 chapters (*A*, fol. 68.3, same in the book version *B*, 54.19), while Macdonald reported that yet another manuscript of the *Yar lung chos 'byung* claims it had 24 ("Histoire," 529–530). Whether any such variation in the purported number of chapters is rooted in actual fact, as Sørensen presumed (*Historiography*, 13–14), or merely traces back to misread numerals or some other mistake remains to be clarified. The textual evidence at my disposal, in any case, does not back up any such variation.

[64] The respective works are not marked with successive labels or folio numbers, so it is possible that their current order, in which the *Lo rgyus chen mo* is not the first work, is the result of a prior reader's reshuffling. Still, missing material indicates that the *'Jig rten dbang phyug gi skye rabs* and the *mDzad pa rnam thar* were copied in that order, so MKB *K*'s exemplar already departed from MKB *R*. (The lacuna at MKB *K*, *lo rgyus*, fol. 14v marks the missing end of the *'Jig rten dbang phyug gi skye rabs* (*lo rgyus*, fols 1–14r; incomplete) and the missing opening of the *mDzad pa rnam thar* (*lo rgyus*, fols 15r–42r, l. 9; incomplete)).

[65] This title is reminiscent of the *rGyal po yab yum thugs khar thim lugs* [How the Union of King and Consort Dissolved into the Heart] found late in MKB *P* (vol. *waṃ*, fol. 651ff.), which however appears to be a different work.

[66] Per Sørensen, "The Bka' chems mTho[n] mthing ma," in *Civilization at the Foot of Mount Sham-po: The Royal House of Lha Bug-pa-can and the History of g.Ya'-bzang*, ed. Tsering Gyalbo, Guntram Hazod, and Per Sørensen (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 147–166. Note that it is not clear from Sørensen's discussion that this text is in fact embedded within an MKB. On this text, also see Per Sørensen, "In his Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 52 (2019): 284–335.

witnesses of this rare work.[67] Finally, it is noteworthy that none of the four full witnesses discussed above (*O*, *R*, *K*, and the collection described by the list [of teachings] received) contains either of the two Buddhist scriptures listed in the catalogue.

Despite the evident variation in extant MKBs, the collection's inventory (which would be absorbed into and elaborated upon in the catalogue) may have nevertheless constituted a common thread that provided a sense of unity across these shifting collections. Importantly, we already find evidence of the inventory's existence in 1376, some 150 years before our earliest datable collection. This passage reproduces lines from the inventory that resemble the text of some handwritten witnesses, but not that of the block prints.[68] The passage, first pointed out by Macdonald,[69] already describes "three dharma cycles pertaining to Mahākāruṇika" composed by the king himself, consisting of a "*sūtra* cycle, a *sādhana* cycle and an advice cycle,"[70] and proceeds to list some of its works.[71]

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[67] These new witnesses can be found in manuscript MKB *O* (vol. *ga*, *sPrul pa'i rgyal po srong tsan rgam po'i bka' chems mtho mding ma* [The Blue Testament of the Emanated King Songtsen the Wise], 71 fols) and, according to the NGMCP catalog, on NGMPP reel E 603/9 (*Sprul pa'i rgyal po srong rtsan sgam po'i bka' chems mtho thing ma*, 73 fols, incomplete), the latter unfortunately being among the reels that were inaccessible during my visit to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. The fact that the work also appears in the list of teachings received described in table 1 suggests that yet more witnesses of the work await discovery in other witnesses of the MKB.

[68] We are quite evidently dealing with verbatim, albeit seemingly clipped, citations from the inventory (*Yar lung chos 'byung* A, fol. 34v, ll. 3–6; MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 2r, ll. 1–3 and fol. 2r, l. 8). There are several differences with the block prints (e.g., MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 6r, ll. 2–5). For instance, both the *Yar lung chos 'byung* and MKB *K*'s inventory omit the additional editorial comment(s) discussed above. Both also note that the *Lo rgyus chen mo* has 41 chapters rather than 36 (an inconsistency the block prints would amend and remark upon), and both refer, surely erroneously, to one scripture as the *Karaṇḍadhāraṇī* (Tib. *Za ma tog gi gzungs*) where we would expect the famous *Karaṇḍa~* or *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Tib. *Za ma tog bkod pa'i mdo*, *za ma tog gi mdo*, *mdo sde za ma tog*, etc.).

[69] Macdonald, "Histoire," 529–530.

[70] *Yar lung chos 'byung* A, fol. 34v, ll. 2–3: *rgyal po nyid kyis thugs rje chen po'i chos skor* {*gsum*} *mdzad _mdo skor dang _sgrub skor dang _zhal gdams kyi skor* _[...].

[71] For instance, the author of the *Yar lung chos 'byung* explicitly mentions the *Lo rgyus chen mo*, the work attributed to Ngödrup (the *Spyi'i khog 'bubs*, i.e., the *bShad 'grel chen mo* [The Great Explanatory Commentary]), the advice section made up of a 'major' (Tib. *che tsho*) and 'minor cluster' (Tib. *chung tsho*), and even the *Gab pa mngon phyung* [The Hidden Revealed]. The latter section is also mentioned (and cited) in the *rGyal rabs gsal*

However, it remains to be seen to what degree circulating collections ever agreed with the inventory. In the extant collections, particularly the absence of two scriptures (the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* and the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs*)[72] from all but some of the late printed editions constitutes a persistent discrepancy that suggests the overlap may have always been limited. Perhaps, the inventory always had a prescriptive quality to it, or, perhaps, simply reflects a frozen snapshot of a collection that itself would continue to change.[73] In any case, the messy reality of these collections

ba'i me long [The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies], similarly completed in the 1370s (Sørensen, *Historiography*, 315–330).

[72] The *Lo rgyus chen mo* might help explain why out of all scriptures, the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* and the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* were included in the collection's inventory and later catalogue. The *Lo rgyus chen mo*, firstly, credits the translation of the entire set of 21 Avalokiteśvara scriptures to Tönmi (fl. 7th century, Tib. Thon mi), a minister of Songtsen, an ascription that ultimately credits the latter for their appearance in Tibet. This notion provides one possible reason for these scriptures, obviously not composed by Songtsen, to nonetheless be included in his collected works (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fols 190.4–191.1; MKB *T*, vol. *ka*, fol. 98v, ll. 2–5; MKB *K*, *mdo skor*, fol. 90r, l. 6–fol. 90v, l. 2, with *K* omitting the first phrases on Songtsen; this notion is also repeated by the *Yar lung chos 'byung* immediately before its reproduction of material from the *kha byang*, see witness *A*, fol. 34v, ll. 1–2).

What is more, the *Lo rgyus chen mo* divides these 21 scriptures into two sets, the first group of fourteen being kicked off by the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* and the second group of seven by the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* (see the opening of the *Lo rgyus chen mo*'s ch. 35). The inclusion of exactly these two scriptures in the inventory may have been inspired by the fact that the *Lo rgyus chen mo* awarded these two works pride of place in their respective groups of Avalokiteśvara scriptures.

The reverse argument, namely that it was the collection's inclusion of these two scriptures that led to their being mentioned first in the *Lo rgyus chen mo*, I find less compelling. The fact that only some later block-printed witnesses (such as the Derge edition) actually started including these scriptures, while the *Lo rgyus chen mo* is (1) present across all consulted witnesses, (2) listed first in the inventory, and (3) particularly adapted to the Tibetan context of the MKB, makes it more likely that the *Lo rgyus chen mo* inspired the scriptural selection (which may have been only nominal to begin with).

[73] MKB *K*, with its somewhat more conservative inventory and its potentially more archaic text (see fn. 39), is striking for another reason. Its formal structure is almost certainly more archaic than that of the other collections known to me, in that it is the only witness that does not stretch the boundaries of the *sūtra* cycle as formally laid out in the inventory. Although *K* adds a variety of works that would in other witnesses come to be included in the *sūtra* cycle, *K* itself makes no attempt to absorb those works into the cycle. The *kha byang* does not record the presence of the additional works, while only the *Lo rgyus chen mo* is marked '*sūtra* cycle' in the folio margins; all other works are not. The additional works appear to have been inserted loosely, their inclusion still tentative. In doing so, MKB *K* sticks closer to the inventory than do the other witnesses, although it too fails to include the scriptures *Karaṇḍavyūha* and *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs*.

absorbing additional works over time would have increasingly widened the gap between any standardised catalogue and the collections in actual circulation.

For all practical purposes, the demonstrated variation in the works included in these collections makes it somewhat misleading to speak of 'the' MKB in the singular. What we find instead is a plurality of collections with varying degrees of overlap. This fluid nature of the collection casts a cloud over our current understanding of how this famous set of works surrounding Avalokiteśvara came into being, an issue we turn to next.

3.1.2. *The Collection's Attribution*

The variation in the collection's make-up is, in and of itself, enough to certify that the traditional attribution of the collection's major subsections—with their vague and porous boundaries[74]—to individual treasure revealers of the 12th and 13th centuries is beset with problems. Compounding these difficulties yet further, even the claim of association between the MKB's cycles and their supposed discoverers is of doubtful provenance.

The passage that has long served to establish what figures retrieved which parts of the collection appears towards the end of many witnesses' prefatory materials (e.g., *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, l. 2–fol. 10_2v, l. 5 and *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 21.4–23.1). Yet this section is missing altogether from at least two manuscript witnesses (*O*, *ka*, fol. 7v, ll. 3–4; *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 6v, l. 3). These crucial omissions suggest that the passage, much like the editorial insertions discussed above, is a later addition. Quite possibly, then, the widely accepted history of the collection is based on nothing but an innovative addition to the collection's introductory materials.

The passage in question, which I will refer to as the 'Transmission Lineage,'[75] describes how parts of the collection were found, transmitted,

[74] Note also that the collection's text itself repeatedly identifies the beginning and end of smaller 'cycles' within its larger 'cycles' (e.g., MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fols 194.2, 334.5, 597.6). Even 'the' *sūtra* cycle itself can be talked about as a plural (vol. *e*, fol. 22.4: *mdo skor rnams*). In combination with the variety of works to actually be included, this further adds to the elusive nature of the boundaries and exact make-up of the larger sections.

[75] This section was translated in Ehrhard, Franz-Karl, "The Transmission of the *dMar-khrid Tshem-bu lugs* and the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum*," in *Vividharatnakaraṇḍaka*: *Festgabe für Adelheid Mette*, ed. Christine Chojnacki, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, and Volker M. Tschannerl (Swisttal-Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 2000), 207–208. The Derge

and successively complemented by further finds. This process reportedly started with the enigmatic *siddha* Ngödrup, who excavated the "teachings of the *sādhana* cycle of Mahākāruṇika."[76] He purportedly passed these on to "Mnga' bdag Myang," also known as Nyang-rel Nyima Özer, or Nyang-rel for short, who in turn excavated the "set of 150 advices" (i.e., the advice cycle)[77] and transmitted these to Latöpa Mikyö Dorjé (fl. latter half of 12th c., Tib. La stod pa Mi bskyod rdo rje). The latter passed materials on to Jetsün (Tib. *rje btsun*, 'venerable') Shākya Zangpo, who, lastly, retrieved and added the *sūtra* cycle and the *Gab pa mngon phyung gi skor* [The Cycle of *The Hidden Revealed*] (the latter sometimes being included as a fourth major cycle).[78] The 'Transmission Lineage' subsequently extends further out to contemporary figures, whose exact identities vary per redaction.[79] In tracing such lines, the 'Transmission Lineage' thus purports to document the history and faithful passing on of the entire collection, itself presented as made up of neatly defined cycles.

Yet considering this passage's dubious provenance and the historical fluctuation of the collection's cycles, it would be wise to instead rely on content from *within* the works themselves for more dependable pointers on the collection's origins. And such text-internal evidence paints a far more complicated picture of the collection's history than does the 'Transmission Lineage.'

For one, when we restrict ourselves to collection-internal evidence, the attribution of the entire advice section to Nyang-rel soon comes to strike the reader as far-fetched. His name does appear within that section, where the relevant colophon in manuscript *O* reads:

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xylograph presents this section with a separate title, namely "The Lineage-holders of these Teachings" (Ehrhard, "The Royal Print," 152).

[76] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, l. 6; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 22.2: *thugs rje chen po'i sgrub* (*b*)*skor gyi chos rnams*.

[77] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 22.3: *zhal gdams brgya dang lnga bcu po*. A prior passage noted that this set of 150 pieces of advice is made up of both the 'major cluster' and 'minor cluster' (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 9v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 18.5), the boundary between which in MKB *P* is found in vol. *waṃ*, fol. 515.5–515.6. Together, the two sections thus appear to cover all of the materials classified as 'advice.'

[78] Sørensen has suggested that this too has circulated independently (*Historiography*, 585–586).

[79] Ehrhard, "Royal Print," 150–152.

> This set of eight[80] forms the cycle on instructions concerning the six-syllabled [*mantra*]. The praise of the virtues of the six-syllabled [*mantra*], along with aspirations for auspiciousness, composed by the Dharma-protecting King Songtsen the Wise is completed. It is a treasure of Lord [(Tib. *mnga' bdag*)] Nyang. *Maṅgalaṃ bhavantu*![81]

At this point, however, the abundant majority of the section on advice is still to follow, and yet other text preceded this eightfold section, while Nyang-rel's name appears nowhere in the colophons before or after. Regardless, the 'Transmission Lineage' ascribes Nyang-rel the discovery of 150 units of advice,[82] vastly more than the eight mentioned in the passage above. The 'Transmission Lineage' clearly did not conjure Nyang-rel's involvement out of thin air, yet it does seem to have substantially overstated his contribution.

One can imagine why the 'Transmission Lineage's' author(s) may have amplified Nyang-rel's role in the collection. The documentation of a lineage is pivotal to record and signal the religious authority of works and their associated dignitaries by anchoring them in established orthodox networks. Yet if indeed the texts in Songtsen's *Collected Works* are heterogeneous in origins and doctrinal details, and various editions of the

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[80] The phrase *brgyad po de*, which remained somewhat unclear in a previous reading (Silk, "A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem: 568, n. 90), refers to the work's eight preceding sections, which are, to my understanding, described as follows in MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fols 63.3–99.6: (1) *yon tan gyi bzlas thabs drug*, (2) *lha lnga'i bstod pa*, (3) *gtso 'khor don bstod*, (4) *yi ge drug pa'i dgu phrugs bstod pa*, (5) *sku la bstod pa*, (6) *gsung la bstod pa*, (7) *thugs la bstod pa*, (8) [concluding prayer] (the latter being an adapted version of the *Po ta lar skye ba'i smon lam*, on which see Doney, "A Yak, Na rak and Potalaka" and Silk, "A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem"). Note however that these eight subsections are parsed somewhat differently in the inventory and catalogue, see MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fols 2v, l. 8–fol. 3r, l. 2; MKB *O*, *ka*, fol. 3v, ll. 6–7; MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 7r, l. 6–fol. 7v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 13.2–13.3.

[81] MKB *O*, vol. *ja*, fol. 42r, ll. 4–5: *brgyad po de yig ge drug pa'i zhal gdams kyi bskor yin no / yig ge drug pa'i yon tan bstod pa / bkra shis smon lam dang bcas pa / chos skyong pa'i rgyal po srong tsan rgam pos mdzad pa rdzogs so / mnga' bdag myang gis gter ma'o / maṃghalaṃbhawantu//*. In MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 99.6–100, the first line instead appears after the penultimate line that mentions Lord Nyang (Tib. *mnga' bdag myang*). Unfortunately, this colophon is not preserved in *K* because the folios on which the passage would have appeared are missing (*zhal gdams*, fols 49–50).

[82] "Nyang, for his part, retrieved a 150-fold [set of] advice from underneath the feet of the Hayagrīva [statue] in the Temple of Mahākāruṇika, and passed it on to Latöpa Mikyö Dorjé" (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 22.3: *myang gis kyang zhal gdams brgya dang lnga bcu po thugs rje chen po'i lha khang gi rta mgrin gyi zhabs 'og nas bton nas/ la stod pa mi bskyod rdo rje la gnang* / (minor spelling variants in MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, l. 6–fol. 10_2v, l. 1). On the '150-fold [set of] advice,' see fn. 77.

collection included different works, then 'the' MKB must have formed in a highly haphazard manner, absorbing works from numerous tradents and authors, across different times and places. It would be nigh impossible to present a compelling transmission line for such a potpourri. The 'Transmission Lineage' was surely a response to this challenge, a written shot at streamlining the collection's fluttering past.

It is not too difficult to imagine *how* such a transmission narrative may have been composed, either. Bits and pieces of the 'Transmission Lineage' in the earliest block print can in fact be found at the end of certain works contained within the collection, with Nyang-rel's involvement only providing a first example. In view of such overlaps and the 'Transmission Lineage''s absence from some manuscripts, I submit that the 'Transmission Lineage' was in fact pieced together, with a fair bit of license, from colophons and concluding lines of various included works.

To further illustrate this process of the 'Transmission Lineage's' copy-composition, I draw attention to a passage at what would once have been the very end of an ancestor of *O* (*ja*, fol. 282r, ll. 2–3).[83] This passage appears to have offered the very first building block of the 'Transmission Lineage':

> As to their transmission /
> (1) the *dharmakāya* Amitābha /
> (2) the *saṃbhogakāya* Mahākāruṇika /
> (3) the *nirmāṇakāya* Songtsen the Wise /
> (4) Padmasaṃbhava of [O]ḍḍiyāna /
> May things be good and auspicious![84]

This passage has some notable peculiarities. First, it is in six-syllable verse. Secondly, its inclusion of Padmasaṃbhava, the famed eighth-century missionary, following Songtsen, is conceptually awkward: This figure's life was separated from Songtsen's by more than a century, and his historiography generally does not interact much with that of the earlier emperor. Furthermore, the two occupy rivalling functional slots in transmission lines, namely as Avalokiteśvara-*nirmāṇakāya* trailblazers of

[83] The manuscript adds two additional works after this point, surely taking its cues from the notes added to the index concerning what additional works warranted inclusion.

[84] MKB *O*, vol. *ja*, fol. 282r, ll. 2–3: *'di rnams kyi rgyud pa ni / chos sku snang pa mtha' yas/ longs sku thugs rje chen po / sprul sku srong tsan rgam po / argyan pad ma 'byung gnas / dge zhing bkra bshis par shog/*.

the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Padmasaṃbhava's inclusion here therefore has the dubious side-effect of undermining his elevated status, as he is no longer at the Tibetan root of his traditions.[85]

This passage is however echoed quite faithfully in the 'Transmission Lineage,' where it operates as the foundation that kicks off a far longer line of transmission (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_2$r, ll. 2–3; *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 21.4–21.5). The genetic relationship between the two passages is confirmed by the duplication of not only the four-member lineage, but also the six-syllable meter, which is preserved even at the expense of Avalokiteśvara's name's last syllable.[86] The meter is then immediately dropped once the replicated passage ends:

(1) The *dharmakāya* Amitābha /
(2) the *saṃbhogakāya* Avalokiteśva[ra] /
(3) the *nirmāṇakāya* Songtsen the Wise /
(4) Padmasaṃbhava, the master / […][87]

The literal agreement between *O* and the 'Transmission Lineage' as preserved in *thob yig* is greater still.[88] The beginning of the 'Transmission Lineage' was evidently copied from a work within the larger collection.

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[85] The competing position of Songtsen and Padmasaṃbhava is also clearly evident from a list [of teachings] received concerning the MKB, where Padmasaṃbhava is promoted to the *nirmāṇakāya* position instead, while Songtsen is placed in the fourth slot, dropping in status from 'nirmāṇakāya' to 'king' (see https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW2PD19899 [last accessed May 15, 2024], vol. *ha*, image 277 [fol. 9r, l. 6 of the digital outline's second *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum gyi thob yig*]). Another illustrative passage appears in the *Blue Annals*, where an Avalokiteśvara lineage runs from Amitābha through Mahākāruṇika directly into Padmasaṃbhava, leaving out Songtsen altogether (George Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1949), 1007). I thank Lewis Doney for helpful thoughts on the relation between these two figures (pers. comm., May 30, 2023).

[86] Unlike in MKB *O*, the bodhisattva's name is not given as *Thugs rje chen po*, but as *Spyan ras gzigs dbang* [*phyug*] (see fn. 87 for the full Tibetan text).

[87] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_2$r, ll. 2–3: *chos sku snang ba mtha' yas*/ *longs sku spyan ras gzigs dbang* / *sprul sku bsrong btsan rgam po*/ *slob dpon padma 'byung gnas*/ […].

For a preliminary discussion of Tibetan notions of the *trikāya* (Tib. *sku gsum*) in which Amitābha features as the *dharmakāya*, see Silk, 'A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem,' 602–604.

Note that Sørensen (*Historiography*, 8) interprets members (3) and (4) of the lineage as a bifurcation instead, i.e., as (3a) and (3b). Yet because Padmasaṃbhava subsequently leads Emperor Tri Songdétsen (742–ca. 800, Tib. Khri Srong lde brtsan) to treasure texts that had been hidden by the earlier Songtsen (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_2$r, ll. 3–6), it is clear that Padmasaṃbhava functions as a chain link following—not substituting for—Songtsen.

[88] In these lists of teachings received, Avalokiteśvara is referred to as 'Mahākāruṇika,' (Tib. *thugs rje chen po*) and Padmasaṃbhava is prefixed with 'Oḍḍiyāna,' (Tib. *o rgyan*)

Thirdly, the inclusion of Ngödrup in the 'Transmission Lineage' also appears to bank on a single collection-internal colophon. The sole colophon that I could find that mentions this figure appears at the end of the commentary *bShad 'grel chen mo* [The Great Explanatory Commentary], and is cited here in unedited form from my digital reproduction of manuscript *K*:[89]

> [Songtsen the Wise], having dedicated the roots of virtue and thinking of the spread of Mahākāruṇika's teachings in later times, buried [this work] in a jewel cache underneath Hayagrīva's right foot in the Temple of the Five Mahākāruṇika Deities[90] in an outward-protruding expansion of the Rasa Trülnang [temple complex] so as to ensure that the teachings would not perish. [This concludes] the *Great Explanatory Commentary*, *The Jewel Ornament [of] Avalokiteśvara*, retrieved from the cache by the master, the *siddha* Ngödrup. May things be good![91]

Although much of the detail is missing, key content of the passage is mirrored in the 'Transmission Lineage':

> Subsequently, the *siddha* Ngödrup removed [the] teachings of Mahākāruṇika's *sādhana* cycle from underneath Hayagrīva's foot. [He] then

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not 'master' (Tib. *slob dpon*). See https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW2PD19899 [last accessed May 14, 2024], vol. 29 (*ha*), images 110 and 227. (For alternative access, see fol. 2v, l. 3 of BDRC's digital outline's first *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum gyi thob yig*, and line two of the first and unnumbered folio side of what is outlined as *Chos kyi rgyal po rig 'dzin grub pa kun 'dus kyi zhabs drung du chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po'i bka' 'bum gter ston grub thob dngos grub kyi gter ma ji ltar thob pa'i brgyud pa*).

[89] This work was either never included in, or at some point removed from, MKB *O*, whose fascicle *cha* is missing (note also that *nga* and *ca* appear in switched order). In MKB *P*, the text appears in vol. *e*, fols 493.6–584.3.

[90] Tib. *thugs rje chen po lha lnga'i lha khang* (var. *thugs rje chen po lha lnga ma'i lha khang*, MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 584.2). In the text whose recovery is attributed to Nyang-rel, and which appears to have relied on the text attributed to Ngödrup (*infra*), the invoked *lha lnga* are (1) Mahākāruṇika himself (Tib. Thugs rje chen po), (2) Bhṛkuṭī (Tib. lHa mo Khro gnyer can), (3) Tārā (Tib. lHa mo sGrol ma), (4) Hayagrīva (Tib. 'Phags pa rTa mgrin), and (5) Amṛtakuṇḍalin (Tib. Khro bo bDud rtsi 'khyil) (see MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 78, l. 2–fol. 79, l. 1).

[91] MKB *K*, *'grel pa*, fol. 44r, ll.3–5: *dge ba rtsa ba sngos nas stan pa mi nub bar bya ba'i don du _dus phyi ma la thugs rje chen po'i stan pa dar bar dgongs nas*: *ra sa 'phrul snang go blo 'phrul [*read: *gi glo 'bur] du thugs rje chen po lha lnga'i lha khang gi rta 'grin kyi zhabs g.yas pa'i 'og du rin po che'i bter du sbas so* [/?] *thugs rje chen po nur bu'i rgyan kyi bshad 'brel chen mo: slob dpon grub thob dngos grub kyis bter nas bton pa'o// dge'o//* (parallel text in MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 584.1–584.3).

> passed them on to Lord Nyang, the rebirth of the divine son [(Tib. *lha sras*)] Tri Songdétsen.[92]

The identity of the treasure revealer, his association with material from the *sādhana* cycle, and the specific hiding spot whence he retrieved it are all retained together. But much like in the case of Nyang-rel's contribution discussed above, details that within the collection pertain to the recovery of a *single* text (the *Great Explanatory Commentary*) now, in the 'Transmission Lineage', describe the provenance of a plurality of works (the "teachings of Mahākāruṇika's *sādhana* cycle").

In doing so, the 'Transmission Lineage' strongly suggests that other works from the *sādhana* section—say, the *Thugs rje chen po yid bzhin nor bu'i sgrub thabs* [Sādhana of Mahākāruṇika's Wish-fulfilling Jewel]—are treasure finds by Ngödrup as well. Yet that text itself claims to have been discovered separately, and anonymously at that: "[An unnamed person] retrieved [it] from Thugs rje chen po'i gling" (*P*, vol. *e*, fol. 489.1). In fact, the majority of works in MKB *P*'s *sādhana* section appears to be of unclaimed, unknown provenance (see fols 586.2, 589.1, 591.4, 597.5–597.6, 608.3–608.4, etc.). If we ignore the likely spurious 'Transmission Lineage,' therefore, the contribution of Ngödrup to the *sādhana* cycle dwindles dramatically.

We find a fourth piece of the 'Transmission Lineage's' puzzle in a colophon that mentions Jetsün Shākya Zangpo, towards the end of (or after)[93] the advice section, just a few folios before the metric passage discussed above:

> Figuring that some day it would become necessary to undertake repairs after Ra sa [i.e., Lhasa] is afflicted by water, [Songtsen's] son buried many valuables and [his father's] methods of bringing homage.[94] The manuscripts

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[92] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10$_2$r, l. 6: *de'i rjes su grub thob dngos grub kyis thugs rje chen po'i sgrub bskor gyi chos rnams/ rta mgrin gyi zhabs 'og nas phyung nas/ lha sras khri bsrong lde btsan gyi skye ba mnga' bdag nyang la gnang* / (minor spelling variants in MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 22.2).

[93] This depends on where the cycles are separated (MKB *K*, *zhal gdams*, fol. 325v, l. 8–fol. 326r, l. 1, also see MKB *O*, *ja*, fol. 277r, l. 7–fol. 277v, l. 1, but cf. MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 651.2, where this is part of a separately titled and, in the Tibetan, separately paginated subcollection).

[94] This colophon follows an address by Songtsen to his son, and the phrase "methods of bringing homage" (Tib. *zhabs tog bya thabs*) likely refers to that very text. The address in question foretells how Lhasa will incur trouble from water in the future, explaining how the area's safety from flooding, its embankments, the well-being of its deities (Tib. *lha*), and

> of these [methods] were installed in a cache. [Later on,] Jetsün Shākya Zangpo revealed these cycles from the cache, from the right thigh of the *yakṣa* Nāga-Kubera. Then, he passed [them] on to the lama physician Gébum.[95]

Various elements from this passage again reappear in the 'Transmission Lineage.' The hiding spot of "the right thigh of the *yakṣa* Nāga-Kubera" resurfaces, albeit now tied to a treasure find by Emperor Tri Songdétsen (*R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, ll. 2–4; *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 21.5–21.6). The theme of water management around "Ra sa", the retrieval of texts by Jetsün Shākya Zangpo from a site associated with a *yakṣa*, and their transmission to the lama physician Gébum, however, are all preserved in tandem:

> Jetsün Shākya Zangpo [...] constructed many embankments and [undertook] many repairs in Ra sa [i.e., Lhasa]. Consequently, he obtained prophetic instructions and removed the *Gab pa mngon phyung* cycles and the *sūtra* cycles from a *yakṣa* dwelling. He passed on all *dharma* cycles of the emanation king [Songtsen] to the precious lama physician Gébum.[96]

Despite the similarities, this part of the 'Transmission Lineage' again displays profound departures from the collection-internal passage. Shākya Zangpo is now ascribed the retrieval of the *sūtra* cycle, which once more has no discernible basis in the collection's texts: the single work that all known witnesses agree to be part of the *sūtra* cycle, the *Great History*, makes no claim as to who retrieved it (e.g., *K*, *mdo skor*, fol. 92r, ll. 1–2; *L*, *kha*, fol. 73r, ll. 6–7; *O*, *kha*, fol. 78v, ll. 1–2; *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 97r, ll. 4–5), while other relevant colophons do not mention Shākya Zangpo. In a second departure, Shākya Zangpo is now depicted as having transmitted "all *dharma* cycles," promoting him from a revealer of merely the

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the fortune of the Tibetan people all co-depend. Accordingly, it exhorts the audience to venerate, and thereby ensure the safety of, Lhasa.

[95] MKB *K*, *zhal gdams*, fol. 325v, l. 7–fol. 326r, l. 1: *ra sa dus lan {cig} chus nyen nas gso dgos par dgongs nas*: *sras kyis kyang zhabs tog bya thabs dang: dkor nor mang du sbas so*// *'di'i phyi mo rnams bter du gzhugs su gsol nas yod do*// *'di'i skor rnams gnod sbyin na ga ku bhe ra'i rla g.yas pa nas rje gtsun shakya bzang pos bter nas bton nas*: *bla ma lha rje dge 'bum la gnang ngo*// (parallel texts in MKB *O*, *ja*, fol. 277r, l. 7–fol. 277v, l. 1 and MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 651.1–651.2).

[96] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 22.4–22.5: [...] *rje btsun shākya bzang po* [...] *des ra sa'i chu rags dang zhig gsos mang po mdzad pas lung bstan thob nas gnod sbyin khang pa nas gab pa mngon phyung gi skor rnams dang* / *mdo skor rnams bton nas*/ *sprul pa'i rgyal po'i chos skor thams cad bla ma rin po che lha rje dge 'bum la gnang* /.

"methods of bringing homage" to a key link in the transmission of the entire collection.

By now, an obvious pattern emerges. Individuals credited in the collection's works with the retrieval of one or perhaps a few texts feature in far greater roles in the 'Transmission Lineage.' Small cogs become major cogwheels.

This impression holds up yet again when we scrutinise the remaining major link in the 'Transmission Lineage's' sketch of the collection's early history, the intermediary figure Latöpa Mikyö Dorjé. Although initially presented as the isolated recipient of the minor section of the advice cycle (MKB *K*, *kha byang*, fol. 5v, l. 3; *O*, vol. *ka*, fol. 7v, ll. 3–4; *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, l. 2; *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 21.4),[97] the 'Transmission Lineage' paints him as having received and transmitted the minor *and* major advice sections, as well as the *sādhana* cycles, and thus again greatly increases an individual's role in the collection's history.[98] The fact that this passage from the 'Transmission Lineage' follows on the heels of the one that describes his role far more modestly only further drives home the disconnect between the 'Transmission Lineage' and the text that precedes it.

In the final analysis, both manuscript evidence and textual analysis indicate that the MKB's 'Transmission Lineage,' which has long anchored our understanding of this collection's history, is in fact a later addition. This passage, newly added to the collection's prefatory materials, seems to have creatively recycled text-historical details from within the collection's works in order to weave a fresh narrative of the origins of the entire compilation. In doing so, it greatly inflated the role of individual contributors.[99]

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[97] Note that MKB *O* (vol. *ka*, fol. 7v, ll. 3–4) substitutes the *la don* particle after Mikyö Dorjé with an ergative and thus casts the latter as the transmitter of these texts, rather than their recipient.

[98] MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 10_2r, l. 6–fol. 10_2v, l. 1: *grub thob dngos grub kyis thugs rje chen po'i sgrub bskor gyi chos rnams* [...] *mnga' bdag nyang la gnang / nyang gis kyang zhal gdams brgya dang lnga bcu po thugs rje chen po'i lha khang gi rta mgrin gyi zhabs 'og nas bton nas/ la stod pa mi skyod rdo rje la gnang / des rje btsun shākya bzang po la gnang /*. A prior note explains that the 'major' and 'minor' section (Tib. *che tsho, chung tsho*) together make up the 150 pieces of advice (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 9v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 18.4–18.5).

[99] The reason for Nyang-rel's selection as a pivotal figure in the transmission is unlikely to be coincidental, and surely relates to his central role in codifying many influential

This twist in the 'Transmission Lineage' had a profound effect. It homogenised the assorted works of Songtsen, a historically motley collection, by providing it with a neatly defined past. No longer a sprawling hodgepodge of works of varied provenance, the compilation was now billed as comprising three organic units stashed away by Emperor Songtsen (or his proxies) in order to be revealed in the future by successive members of a single religious lineage. In this way, a textual potpourri was recast as a coherent collection that could boast not only a documented linear history, but an ancient teleological design to boot. Out of chaos, order.

3.1.3. *The Collection as a Source for the Early Avalokiteśvara Cult*

What does this updated view of the collection's past mean for the study of Avalokiteśvara's cult and mythology? In view of the MKB's turbulent history, we have little to go by when deciding which works were part of the collection in the early days, centuries prior to its earliest datable witness being printed in 1521. Many a work in the extant collections may have been added, edited, compiled, or even composed well beyond the period 1150–1250. Worse still, seeing as the 'Transmission Lineage' cannot be relied upon, it is no longer obvious that 'the' collection, in whatever shape, even existed at such an early time at all (although it had certainly appeared in recognisable form by the 1370s).[100] This collapse of the MKB's accepted dates curbs the immediate historical usefulness of many of its constituent works, yet simultaneously boosts our capacity to recognise historical layers and developments within its pages.

Although the MKB's material credibly attributable to 12th-century figures such as Ngödrup and Nyang-rel is highly limited,[101] the works

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teachings and texts, which would eventually feed into the Nyingma (Tib. rNying ma) school of Tibetan Buddhism (on that topic, see Cathy Cantwell, "Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192): Authority and Authorship in the Coalescing of the rNying ma Tantric Tradition," *Medieval Worlds 12* (2020): 68–79.

[100] *Yar lung chos 'byung* A, fol. 68.2–fol. 69.1.

[101] Based on my observations above, only some 18 folios (vol. *waṃ*, fol. 63.3–fol. 100.1) out of the roughly 668 that make up the two volumes of block print MKB *P* can be ascribed to Nyang-rel—some 2.7% of the total. In the case of his contemporary Ngödrup, this number rises to a still underwhelming 6.8%, constituting a single work (vol. *e*, fol. 493.6–fol. 584.3).

Moreover, text-historical hurdles remain even for those portions, especially Ngödrup's work. In the case of Nyang-rel's composition, its constituent parts appear in different orders

whose colophons do explicitly credit these figures promise much material of interest. These texts provide plausible historical baselines against which we can compare other sources presumed to be from the 12th century as well as later works, and they thus offer some scaffolding for our reconstruction of the development of Avalokiteśvara's mythology.

Nyang-rel's work, a composition titled (in *P*) the *Yi ge drug pa'i gsung gi zhal gdams kyi skor* [Cycle of Advice on the Utterance of the Six-syllabled (Mantra)],[102] embraces the notion that Emperor Songtsen is an emanation of Mahākāruṇika, [103] a fundamental tenet of Tibetan Avalokiteśvara mythology. The work also expresses devotion to the deified female version of the six-syllable *mantra*, as well as to Avalokiteśvara's thousand-armed form. [104] Nyang-rel and Ngödrup's works are both heavily centered on and structured around the six-syllable *mantra*, *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*. Both alike also remark, in exactly the same phrasing, that each individual syllable liberates from one of the six realms of rebirth.[105]

Nyang-rel's text offers prayers for rebirth in Avalokiteśvara's pure realm, Mt. Potalaka, which is here located inside Sukhāvati.[106] That twist of location, as Silk notes, reflects "a doctrinally difficult (or at least innovative) cosmology",[107] and might point to creative myth-making in

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in MKB *P* than in *K* and *O*, an issue that requires further attention. Ngödrup's text, at least in its current form, may not be as early as previously believed. Kapstein (*Tibetan Assimilation*, 146) already pointed out that it contains a reference to the *Lo rgyus chen mo* (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 498.3; MKB *K*: *'grel pa*, fol. 3v, l. 1). That work, *pace* Kapstein, is unlikely to be very old if extant witnesses are any indication (see fn. 129). The *Lo rgyus chen mo* almost certainly postdates Nyang-rel's composition, and Ngödrup's text in turn might postdate the *Lo rgyus chen mo* (in light of the fact that it mentions it). The reference to the *Lo rgyus chen mo* in Ngödrup's work may of course have found its way into the text after it was composed, perhaps upon being included into the MKB (also see fn. 123). A detailed study of Ngödrup's work's witnesses and doctrinal context might resolve the matter.

[102] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 99.6–fol. 100.1. Immediately prior, the work is also titled or described as *Yi ge drug pa'i yon tan bstod pa bkra shis smon lam dang bcas pa* [Praise of the Benefits of the Six-Syllable (*Mantra*), with an Auspicious Prayer].

[103] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 73.4–73.5.

[104] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fols 79.4 and 78.1–78.2.

[105] In fact, both here and elsewhere, the two texts share verbatim passages. See p. 50 and fn. 167.

[106] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 97.4–97.5.

[107] Silk, "A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem," 563, fn. 83.

Nyang-rel's work.[108] A similar desire for rebirth "in Mahākāruṇika's realm" (Tib. *thugs rje chen po'i zhing*) is expressed in Ngödrup's text, though there neither its name nor location is specified.[109]

Fascinatingly, both the works by Nyang-rel and Ngödrup seem engaged in dissociating Avalokiteśvara from the Buddha Amitāyus/Amitābha, whose relation was certainly already established in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* of around 600 CE.[110] The aforementioned aspirations for rebirth in Avalokiteśvara's rather than Amitāyus's realm provide a first instance of such disentanglement.[111] Ngödrup's text also identifies the bodhisattva's *dharmakāya* not as Amitābha—as the larger collection's introductory materials do[112]—but as "Eleven-faced, Four-handed Mahākāruṇika."[113] In sustained contrast with the MKB's opening materials, both works also fail to invoke Amitābha/Amitāyus in their opening homages, which hail only Mahākāruṇika.[114] In these works, therefore, we may be witnessing a certain emancipation of Avalokiteśvara's role towards a more self-contained position, although this may have earlier precedents.[115]

[108] Note that Avalokiteśvara's abode on Mt. Potalaka is mentioned independently from Sukhāvati elsewhere in the work (MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 92.1–92.2), and the conflation of the location of these two places may simply be the unintended effect of absorbing lines from an older work, rather than a conscious innovation. Interestingly, however, both Potala and Sukhāvati also appear side-by-side as aspirational places for rebirth in a famous *sādhana* composed by Thangtong Gyalpo (fl. 14th/15th c., Tib. Thang stong rgyal po), the *mKha' khyab ma* (see *Thugs rje chen po'i bsgom bzlas 'gro don mkha' khyab ma* [Benefit for Beings, as Expansive as the Sky: Meditation and Recitation of Mahākāruṇika], in *Chenrezi: Benefiting Beings as Vast as Space: Meditations and Prayers of the Great Compassionate One* (Questa: Pal Nyammay Kagyupay Sangha Monlam Chenmo, n.d., fol. 4r–fol. 11r), fol. 8v–fol. 11r.

[109] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 584.1.

[110] On the dating of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, see Peter Bisschop, "Buddhist and Śaiva Interactions in the Kali Age," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 61.4 (2018): 403. Silk notes that the relation between Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara "remains to be explored in sufficient detail" ("A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem," 553).

[111] In contrast, a conservative redaction of the *Pillar Testament* presents the ultimate task of Avalokiteśvara as leading the beings of Tibet into the presence of Amitābha (*D*, fol. 373.1–373.4).

[112] E.g., MKB *K*, *bka' 'bum rgyud pa'i gsol 'debs*, fol. 1v, l. 1; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 8.1, also see fol. 2.2.

[113] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 505.4.

[114] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 494.1 and vol. *waṃ*, fol. 63.3; MKB *K*, *'grel pa*, fol. 1v, l. 1 and *zhal gdams*, fol. 33v, l. 1.

[115] As Sam van Schaik kindly pointed out, in Mahāyoga *sādhana* literature from Dunhuang, which predates the MKB's compilation, Avalokiteśvara already repeatedly

Further evidence of Avalokiteśvara's rising star is found in Nyang-rel's work's possibly innovative twists on some well-known Buddhist episodes, which are (re)organised around Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable *mantra*. For one, it telegramatically tells the story of Ajātaśatru, an infamous patricidal usurper well-known throughout Buddhist literature.[116] In Nyang-rel's versified telling, this prince was reborn in a cold hell as a consequence of having murdered his own father.[117] Śākyamuni Buddha subsequently liberated him from the infernal freeze by uttering a single *mantra*. This *mantra*, of course, was Avalokiteśvara's *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*.[118] By infusing Śākyamuni Buddha's biographical feats with Avalokiteśvara's *mantra*, this story of the Buddha can conclude with an injunction that promotes Avalokiteśvara's salvific arsenal: "All fortunate ones, recite [*Oṃ*] *maṇi padme* [*hūṃ*]!"[119]

A similar development is evident in Nyang-rel's retelling of the narrative of the notorious murderer Aṅgulimāla (Tib. Sor mo phreng ba). This figure, misled by a heretic teacher, famously committed to murdering a thousand people. In Nyang-rel's text, Aṅgulimāla falls into the hell realms upon having killed 999 people, after which he too is liberated by the Buddha's invocation of the six-syllable *mantra*. A classic Tibetan source for this narrative, the *mDzangs blun gyi mdo* [Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish], instead has Śākyamuni simply explain to Aṅgulimāla how he has been duped by his teacher; no *mantra* is used.[120] The framing of this story in Nyang-rel's work however again buttresses its take-home message: "All fortunate ones, recite *[Oṃ] ma ṇi padme* [*hūṃ*]!"[121]

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appears as the ritual's main deity, occupying the central soteriological role without displaying dependence on, or subservience to, Amitābha. Amitābha, he added, does however appear in Avalokiteśvara's crown in these materials.

[116] Michael Radich, *How Ajātaśatru was Reformed: The Domestication of "Ajase" and Stories in Buddhist History* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2011).

[117] MKB *O* notes that he murdered his mother, too (*ja*, fol. 36v, l. 1: *pha ma bsad* [...] vs. MKB *K* and *P*'s *pha bsad* [...]).

[118] MKB *K*, *zhal gdams*, fol. 43v, ll. 3–6; MKB *O*, *ja*, fol. 36v, ll. 1–2; MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 84.5–84.6.

[119] MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 84.6: *skal ldan kun ma ṇi padme bsgrongs/*. Both the narrative's opening and the liberating quote attributed to the Buddha feature the unabbreviated *mantra Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*.

[120] Derge 341, fol. 255r–fol. 256r.

[121] MKB *K*, *zhal gdams*, fol. 44r, ll. 2–4; MKB *P*, vol. *waṃ*, fol. 85.4–85.6.

These passages in Nyang-rel's work not only indicate a growing concern with Avalokiteśvara and his pithy *mantra* as a central soteriological refuge but would also go on to influence subsequent writing. They appear to have served, for instance, as a template for a series of chapters in the *Great History*. There is in fact a total of five consecutive chapters in the *Great History* (ch. 29–33) that have narrative parallels, along with literal overlaps, in roughly a single folio of Nyang-rel's work.[122] Historically, the *Great History* may be of particular importance in that it opens up nearly all known witnesses of the MKB, and thus appears to have functioned as a keystone narrative for the collection as a whole.[123] In its retellings of Nyang-rel's stories, we see the role of Avalokiteśvara expand.

The five chapters all elaborate on the narrative kernels found in Nyang-rel's text by adding detail while also recasting the protagonists as emanations of Avalokiteśvara. Thus, while the Ajātaśatru story related by Nyang-rel features Śākyamuni as a voice for Avalokiteśvara's *mantra*, the *Great History* casts Śākyamuni's entire person as a mere display of Avalokiteśvara:

> Ārya Avalokiteśvara looked upon [Ajātaśatru's] incredible suffering with a compassionate eye, and then emanated as the Conqueror Śākyamuni. He radiated light rays from his body, and by reciting *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*, [Ajātaśatru's] suffering from the cold was pacified [...][124]

Radich has demonstrated that adaptations of Ajātaśatru's story, which was refashioned and retold throughout Buddhist literature across time and space, have been "associated with some of the most epoch-making

[122] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 139.6–140.3, fol. 140.3–140.6, fol. 140.6–fol. 141.3, fol. 141.4–142.1, fol. 142.1–142.4; cf. vol. *waṃ*, fol. 84.3–84.5, fol. 84.5–84.6, fol. 85.1–85.2, fol. 85.2–85.3, fol. 85.4–85.6. With the exception of Aṅgulimāla's narrative, these stories appear in the same order (1 2 3 4 5 > 1 2 4 5 3).

[123] Concerning this suggestion, also see fn. 72 on the possibility that the text of the *Great History* provided the collection's editors, or author(s) of the *kha byang*, with the reason to include the scriptures *Kāraṇḍavyūha* and *Phyag stong spyan stong gi gzungs* in particular. If the *Great History* was indeed a linchpin in the incipience of the collection as a whole, this might well explain why a reference to it would have made its way into Ngödrup's text in the MKB, on which, see fn. 101.

[124] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 140.5–140.6: [...] *shin tu sdug bsngal bar gyur pa la/ 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug gis thugs rje'i spyan gyis gzigs te/ rgyal ba shākya thub par sprul nas sku las 'od zer bkye ste/ oṃ ma ṇi padme hūṃ/ zhes bzlas pas/ grang ba'i sdug bsngal bde bar gyur* [...].

doctrinal developments in Buddhist history."[125] Here we see that the Tibetan ascent of Avalokiteśvara too left an indelible mark on the narrative, which would subsequently be propagated for centuries in countless manuscripts and prints of the MKB. The rise of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult can thus be added to Radich's long list of monumental Buddhist shifts reflected in this story's evolution across Asia.

The shift of liberating agency into the hands of Avalokiteśvara is evident in the surrounding chapters of the *Great History,* too. Not only Śākyamuni (ch. 30, 31) but also figures like the bodhisattva Gaganagañja (ch. 33), or a *maṇi*-reciting lord of the *asura*s (ch. 29) morph into signposts of Avalokiteśvara's all-encompassing activity.

Silk, furthermore, has shown that the *Great History*'s opening chapter even goes so far as to strip Amitābha from descriptions of his own paradise and to replace him with Avalokiteśvara.[126] In these adapted narratives and descriptions in the *Great History,* which evidently postdates Nyang-rel's work, Avalokiteśvara ascends to the apex of Buddhist soteriological agency, eclipsing even well-known buddhas.

Accompanying the bodhisattva's ascent was the six-syllable *mantra*'s growing popularity. The *mantra* not only made its way into the narratives featuring Ajātaśatru, Aṅgulimāla, Gaganagañja, and so on, but Amitābha's ousting from his own paradise too is announced by the arrival of the *mantra*. The newly phrased text, adapted from an obviously centuries-old composition, now opened the entire *Great History* as follows: "*Oṁ maṇipadme hūṁ*! With folded hands I do obeisance to the Noble Avalokiteśvara, the greatly compassionate one."[127]

It is possible that the works absorbed into the MKB gradually accrued changes owing to their affiliation with (other works in) the larger collection. Wherever I am aware of (potential) source materials for the MKB's texts, in any case, the MKB's adaptation adds a layer of Avalokiteśvara and *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*. This is not only the case for the Dunhuang manuscripts discussed by Silk, but also for the *Prayer to be Reborn on Potala*,[128] Ngödrup's phrasing as likely re-used by Nyang-rel (cf. MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 500 and vol. *waṃ*, fol. 87), famous Buddhist

[125] Radich, *Ajātaśatru,* 1.
[126] Silk, "A Dunhuang Tibetan Poem," 553.
[127] Ibid., 553–554.
[128] Doney, "A Yak, Na rak and Potalaka," 85 and appendix 1.

narratives (Aṅgulimāla's story, Ajātaśatru's deliverance), and even citations from scripture.

At the outset of this article (section 2), I presented a translation of a passage from an Avalokiteśvara-centric scripture preserved in Dunhuang, focused on the 108 names of Avalokiteśvara. It promised a wide range of benefits to those who recite these epithets: avoidance of bad rebirths, freedom from skin and lung diseases, rebirth in Sukhāvati, and so on. Yet in the *Great History*, a work in its current form likely no earlier than the 13th or even 14th century,[129] the source of these benefits changes. Now the avoidance of bad rebirths, freedom from diseases and rebirth in Sukhāvati are said to result from reciting the mantra *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*.[130]

With improved diachronic understanding of the materials in the MKB, many developments thus come to the fore. Nyang-rel's *Cycle of Advice on the Utterance of the Six-syllabled [Mantra]*, if genuine, demonstrates that he, writing or redacting in the 12th century, already forwarded various important elements of Avalokiteśvara's cult as known from later periods. He presented possibly innovative interpretations of older materials, presenting them as intimately involving Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable *mantra*. Yet the later *Great History* proves clearly that key developments were still to come. It would require a subsequent reuse of Nyang-rel's words to catapult Avalokiteśvara to soteriological supremacy. This impression of a momentum that was still building in and after the 12th century is confirmed by other sources discussed in the concluding section below, and by the *Pillar Testament*, too.

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[129] This rough dating of the *Lo rgyus chen mo* is based on its narrative content, as well as the work's apparent reliance on a composition attributed to Nyang-rel (*infra*). Its origin narrative of the Tibetans, for one, is conceptually highly developed, and at a sizeable remove from the far simpler narratives found in the most archaic extant redactions of works with a credible claim to 12th-century origins, such as the *Pillar Testament* or Nyang-rel's *Zangs gling ma* [Copper Island]. The large role of the *mantra oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ* within the *Lo rgyus chen mo*, too, may well be reflective of a somewhat later date, as is discussed in the remainder of the article.

[130] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 177.4–177.5: *'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug yid la byas te/ oṃ ma ṇi padme hūṃ/ zhes bzlas brjod byas na* [...]. Note that a clearly related and similarly distorted citation attributed to the same *sūtra* appears at the end of the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum chen mo*, an undated work affiliated with, but unlikely to have been authored by, the 13th-century Guru Chöwang. Importantly, the phrasing of that citation sticks closer to the *sūtra*'s extant witnesses than does the one found in the *Great History*, suggesting that the citation in the *Great History* deteriorated over time.

3.2. *The* Pillar Testament *(Bka' chems ka khol ma)*

The *Pillar Testament*, whose incipience is generally placed in the 11th or 12th century, seems to represent a major pivot in Tibetan engagement with Avalokiteśvara. In this early treasure text, also attributed to Emperor Songtsen himself, the bodhisattva takes on the highly Tibet-focused role so familiar from later Tibetan traditions. Charged with the country's soteriological weal by the Buddhas Śākyamuni and Amitāyus, his aspirations on Jambudvīpa home in on Tibet, where he goes to work in Śākyamuni's stead after the latter passes away without ever having graced the region with his presence. The responsibility over the soteriological future of this still desolate realm falls to Avalokiteśvara.

The work subsequently details how Avalokiteśvara had a major hand in populating the Tibetan plateau with proto-humans, the future Tibetans, in order to lay a base for Buddhism there. He ensured the inhabitants' survival through introducing agriculture and dotting the landscape with natural resources and civilised them through the institution of laws as a grand king, Songtsen the Wise, in which role he also initiated Tibet's adoption of Buddhism. In the *Pillar Testament*, in sum, Avalokiteśvara is the fertile ground from which spring all things that are good and righteous in Tibet.

Yet much like the MKB's past, the textual history of the *Pillar Testament* is far from straightforward. Since I have discussed this matter in detail elsewhere, [131] I shall not dwell on the details here. Suffice it to say that multiple redactions are extant, and the redaction that scholarship has usually consulted thus far is heavily affected by horizontal transmission, far longer than other witnesses, and likely comparatively late: certainly no earlier than the 13th century, and perhaps as late as the 15th century. Accordingly, when scholars previously inspected the *Pillar Testament*, they tended to look at a text that is separated from the Dunhuang materials not by mere decades, as was sometimes assumed, but rather by centuries of accruing and developing tradition.

And tradition does not sit still. During the work's transmission, judging by four of the extant redactions (*D*, *P*, *L*/*N*, *S*/*M*), it accrued pious

[131] See Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar," which identifies and analyses a series of narrative changes to different episodes across various extant redactions of the *Pillar Testament* in order to illuminate the redactions' mutual relations. It also provides new text-internal evidence that helps narrow down the dating of the extant texts.

spectacle, narrative elaboration, versified passages, increased literary parallelism, iconographic detail, identifications of historical figures with transcendental bodhisattvas, and more. Armed with a better understanding of the work's redactions, we can now revisit the role of Avalokiteśvara and his *mantra* throughout this work's textual history with improved acumen.

Notably, the most conservative extant redaction of the *Pillar Testament*, preserved in witness *D*, almost completely ignores the six-syllable *mantra Oṃ ma ṇi padme hūṃ*, not citing it once in its 60 folios. Counter to what van Schaik noted, then, the *Pillar Testament* is not in fact part of "the first firm Tibetan textual evidence for the centrality of the six-syllable mantra".[132] The redaction is familiar with it, as it mentions, in a narrative aside, a self-arising image of (the deified version of?) the *mantra*,[133] and also repeatedly refers to the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, the scripture that famously promoted this *mantra*.[134] Yet the redaction never actually cites the *mantra* itself. Nor does it show any special concern for it, let alone present teachings or analyses of it as we find in Nyang-rel's or Ngödrup's works in the MKB. The aforementioned self-arisen image of the *mantra*, moreover, is not even reported to have appeared in Tibet, but in Eastern India. The text of *Pillar Testament D* therefore provides no indication whatsoever that its author(s) or compiler(s) placed great stock in the *mantra*.

In contrast, less conservative redactions of the *Pillar Testament* start featuring the *mantra* by prominently inserting it at the outset of the work.[135] The most elaborate extant redaction reveals the novelty of the *mantra*'s stature elsewhere as well. Its chapters that are paralleled in other witnesses almost universally commence with a simple 'Subsequently, [...]' (Tib. *de nas*). Yet the redaction carries two additional chapters that are absent from the more conservative and pithier redactions (ch. 15 & 16), both of which start off with *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ* instead.[136] Clearly, editors of later

[132] Van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult," 67.

[133] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 400.7–fol. 401.3; parallels are found in, e.g., *Pillar Testament P*, fol. 30r, ll. 4–6; *Pillar Testament L*, fol. 686.6–fol. 687.3.

[134] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 364.4, 372.4 and 396.3.

[135] *Pillar Testament L*, fol. 603.1; *Pillar Testament S*, 1.4 (Anon., *bKa' chems ka khol ma* [*Pillar Testament*], ed. Ser gtsug nang bstan dpe rnying 'tshol bsdu phyogs sgrig khang (Lhasa, 2019(?)), etc. Note that *Pillar Testament P* does not open with the *mantra*.

[136] *Pillar Testament S*, 191 and 225.

days saw fit to mark off new sections of text with this *mantra*. This practice perfectly parallels the MKB, which consistently uses the *mantra* to separate and introduce sections, chapters, and works alike, but such usage of the *mantra* was clearly innovative to the *Pillar Testament* tradition.

In a further display of the *mantra*'s ascent, the more progressive redactions contain what seems to be a Tibetanised interpretation of the passage that detailed how a self-arisen image of the *mantra* appeared in India. In these other redactions, to wit, we encounter a prophecy stating that a "bulging image of the six-syllable heart [*mantra*], the secret heart of the *dharma*" shall appear somewhere within Tibet. The object of this prophecy is then identified with a famous image in Gyéré (Tib. Gye re), in the Central Tibetan region of Ü (Tib. dBus),[137] along the Kyichu (Tib. sKyid chu).[138] The parallel passage in *S* includes an additional remark that this formation "was the first among the self-arisen six-syllable [*mantra*s] in Tibet",[139] suggesting that plenty more had since appeared in its wake. In this latter redaction, moreover, we no longer find the episode in which the *mantra* emerged in India. In effect, the *mantra*'s miraculous appearance has been transplanted from the Indian landscape to Tibet, where, the text suggests, such images had already become a somewhat familiar sight. Such changes as documented above clearly reflect the rising stature of the six-syllable *mantra* as the *Pillar Testament* was being transmitted and adapted.

Yet another illustrative change in the work appears in the opening homages, where we see a shift of devotional attention away from Amitāyus in order to centre it squarely on Avalokiteśvara instead, much

[137] *Pillar Testament P*, fol. 34r, ll. 1–2: *chos kyi snying po gsang pa'i yig ge 'bru drug gi snying po'i gzugs snyan 'bur ba nga'i yul du 'char bar 'gyur te*: *des sems can mang po'i don byed par 'gyur ro zhes dbus kyi gye ri'i yig ge drug par lung bstan te*: (parallel readings with variants in *Pillar Testament L*, fol. 695.6–fol. 696.1; *Pillar Testament N*, fol. 859.7–859.8). Consider also the fact that in the notes at the end of *Pillar Testament P*, following the work's formal conclusion, we find a citation attributed to the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* that proclaims the incalculable merit of reciting "the heart of Ārya Avalokiteśvara," being the six-syllable *mantra* (fol. 82v, l. 6–fol. 83r, l. 3).

[138] This site was apparently destroyed during road construction in the 1960s or 1970s (Per K. Sørensen and Guntram Hazod, with Tsering Gyalbo, *Thundering Falcon: An Inquiry into the History and Cult of Khra-'brug, Tibet's First Buddhist Temple* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005), 254–255, fn. 59.

[139] *Pillar Testament S*, 103.10–103.11: *bod du yi ge drug pa'i rang byon la snga ba de yin no/*.

like we saw in some of the works of the MKB. The seemingly most archaic extant redaction *D* commences as follows: "Obeisance to the Father, the Protector Amitāyus, together with his Son!"[140]

Note the differences with the opening of the more developed witness *L*: "*Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ*! Obeisance to the Lord of Great Compassion, Ārya Avalokiteśvara!"[141]

Amitāyus is dropped altogether, and the six-syllable *mantra* receives pride of place. Although Avalokiteśvara obviously stars in the narratives of all witnesses of the *Pillar Testament*, only the opening formulas of the less archaic redactions signal his ascendancy over Amitāyus.[142]

Other constituent elements of Avalokiteśvara's cult, including aspects of his role in Tibetan history, also visibly develop across the redactions of the *Pillar Testament*. The bodhisattva plays a key role in populating the Tibetan Plateau with humans in all redactions, yet he does not feature as the Tibetans' ancestor in all of them. In redaction *D*, the ancestor is quite simply described as a simian bodhisattva who is a disciple of Avalokiteśvara. Although he is certainly no regular monkey, he is a monkey nonetheless.[143] In other redactions, however, the Tibetan forebear comes to be identified as an emanation of the bodhisattva himself:

> Then, in order to turn the beings of the Snowclad Land, who were not [fit] vessels [for the Buddhist teachings], into humans, [Avalokiteśvara] dispatched an emanation [...] a king of monkeys, an emanation of Ārya Avalokiteśvara [...][144]

Such identifications of other figures in more developed redactions of the *Pillar Testament* similarly evince the expanding role of Avalokiteśvara in Tibetan historical writing. The two chief consorts of Emperor Songtsen, for instance, are eventually identified with divinities born from the tears

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[140] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 364.1: *'gon po tshe dpag tu med pa yab dang sras su bcas pa la phyag 'tshal lo:*.

[141] *Pillar Testament L*, fol. 613.1–613.2: *oṃ ma ṇi padme hūṃ _thugs rje chen po'i bdag po 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug la phyag 'tshal lo /*.

[142] See also the two opening salutations in *Pillar Testament S*, 1.4–1.6 and 1.10–1.11. In contrast, redaction *P*, which is generally more conservative than *L*, sticks closer to *D*. *Pillar Testament P*, fol. 1v, ll. 1–2: *rgyal ba mgon po tshe dpag tu med pa yab sras kyi rgyal po la phyag 'tshal lo//*.

[143] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 381.1ff.

[144] *Pillar Testament L*, fol. 647.5–648.1: *de nas kha ba can gyi sems can snod du ma gyur pa de rnams mir sgyur ba'i phyir sprul pa btang ste* [...] *'phags pa spyan ras gzigs kyi sprul pa spre'u'i rgyal po* [...].

of Avalokiteśvara. The missionary Atiśa, too, becomes equated with Avalokiteśvara Mahākāruṇika.[145] Such developments across witnesses of the *Pillar Testament* demonstrate that the perceived involvement of Avalokiteśvara in weighty historical events grew ever more intimate as time passed and the tradition developed.

4. *Concluding Synthesis: The Rise of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult*

Having winnowed the available textual evidence, we now find ourselves with a sharper eye to assess the details of Avalokiteśvara's rise to prominence within Tibet. This bodhisattva's cult, old and wide-ranging as it is, is obviously not a monolith but made up of various elements that gradually grew and coalesced into a broader tradition. With some pieces of this puzzle out on the table,[146] we may now venture a tentative timeline of how Avalokiteśvara's Tibetan mythology developed. Here, other literature from the Tibetan Plateau of the period of the later propagation provides helpful material to fortify our findings.

The foundational tenet of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara mythology is surely the notion that the seventh-century Tibetan Emperor Songtsen was an emanation of the bodhisattva. Avalokiteśvara's emanational kingship is already clearly formulated in redaction *D* of the *Pillar Testament* and in Nyang-rel's work in the MKB, both of which have a plausible claim to a 12th-century date. We find corroborating evidence of Songtsen's status as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara from roughly the same time period in early witnesses of the *Zangs gling ma* [Copper Island] (a treasure text also ascribed to Nyang-rel),[147] the *dBa' bzhed* [Testimony of Ba] manuscript,[148] and the 12th-century *Chos la 'jug pa'i sgo* [Entrance Gate to the Dharma]

[145] Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar." *Pillar Testament S*, 1.19–2.2, 127.19–128.9. The notion that the two princesses were embodiments of Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī is not yet present in the main text of *Pillar Testament D*, although its scribal colophon does mention it (fol. 480.2–480.3).

[146] Note that a variety of elements of the cult could not be taken into consideration in this paper, not least among which the politically salient lineages of reincarnating Buddhist prelates claimed to be emanations of Avalokiteśvara.

[147] *Zangs gling ma*, witnesses *h*, fol. 20r, ll. 1–2 and fol. 107r, ll. 4–5; *Zangs gling ma*, witness *i*, fol. 17r, ll. 4–5 and fol. 86$_2$r, ll. 3–4.

[148] Tsering Gonkatsang and Michael Willis, "Part Two: Text and Translation," in *Bringing Buddhism to Tibet: History and Narrative in the* Dba' bzhed *Manuscript*, ed. Lewis Doney (Boston and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 106–109.

written by Sonam Tsemo (1142–1182, Tib. bSod nams rtse mo).[149] The claim is also found in works from the 13th century, such as those compiled by Khépa De'u (fl. 13th c., Tib. mKhas pa lDe'u)[150] and Nelpa Paṇḍita (fl. 13th c., Nel pa paNDi ta Grags pa sMon lam blo gros).[151] By the 12th century, the claim that this early Tibetan emperor was in fact Avalokiteśvara had clearly already gained substantial traction in Tibetan Buddhist literature.

Van Schaik has credibly argued that the Tibetan belief in bodhisattva-kings may have ultimately derived inspiration from Khotanese Buddhism.[152] A similar belief in bodhisattva-rulers was, moreover, also championed in Tang China, where empress Wu Zetian (625–705, 武則天) was promoted as an emanation of the bodhisattva Vimalaprabhā.[153] The fact that such notions were current at a very early date in Buddhist cultures well-connected to Tibet buttresses the idea that bodhisattva kingship indeed formed the historical taproot of the rich Tibetan mythology that would develop around Avalokiteśvara.

Furthermore, the Tibetan Empire's head being Avalokiteśvara is wholly in line with some of the *sūtra*s that inspired the Songtsen-centered treasure literature. In Buddhist scripture, Avalokiteśvara is repeatedly said to appear in whatever shape that suits beings, including in the form of a king. This notion is forwarded, for one, in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*

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[149] Bsod nams rtse mo, "Chos la 'jug pa'i sgo zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos [Treatise Titled Entrance Gate to the Dharma]," in *dPal ldan sa skya'i bka' 'bum: The Collected Works of the Founding Masters of Sa-skya: Reproduced from the 1736 Derge Edition* (New Delhi, 1992), vol. 4, fol. 624.1–624.2.

[150] Dan Martin, *A History of Buddhism in India and Tibet: An Expanded Version of the Dharma's Origins Made by the Learned Scholar Deyu* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2022), 497.

[151] Helga Uebach, *Nel-pa Paṇditas Chronik Me-tog phreṅ-ba: Handschrift der Library of Tibetan Works and Archives: Tibetischer Text in Faksimile, Transkription und Übersetzung* (Munich: Kommission für Zentralasiatische Studien, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987), 58–59.

[152] Sam van Schaik, "Red Faced Barbarians, Benign Despots and Drunken Masters: Khotan as a Mirror to Tibet," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 36 (2016), see also Lewis Doney, "Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet: The Case of Tri Songdétsen," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 24 (2015).

[153] Antonio Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Tunhuang Document S. 6502, followed by an Annotated Translation* (Napoli: Instituto universitario orientale, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1976); Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[Lotus Sūtra], which is found not only among the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts (P. T. 572), but is also referred to in the *Pillar Testament* and cited at length in the MKB's *Great History*.[154] The idea is also promoted in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*,[155] a scripture that finds repeated mention in both the *Pillar Testament* and the *Great History*.[156] In fact, this scripture in particular may have played an outsize role in both works. The *Great History* either directly or indirectly drew inspiration from it for a number of themes and chapters (ch. 11, 22, 23, 26, and 27). The *Pillar Testament*, moreover, explicitly cites the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* to introduce its central motive: It cleverly incorporates a passage from the *sūtra* into the scene-setting story that explains Avalokiteśvara's concern for Tibet.[157]

It was likely in the logical extension of the idea of bodhisattva-kingship that Tibet became firmly identified as Avalokiteśvara's realm. In his role as Songtsen, after all, Avalokiteśvara stood at the helm of the Plateau's politics, its embrace of Buddhism, and the incipience of its cultural order (including the introduction of writing, law and Tibet's most sacred statues). Such beliefs surrounding local history could help sustain the notion that Avalokiteśvara was and would remain intimately involved with Tibet.

The perception that Tibet constitutes Avalokiteśvara's realm transpires clearly, though implicitly, from a seemingly archaic redaction of the *Pillar Testament*. On his deathbed, Śākyamuni Buddha places the fate of Tibet's inhabitants in Avalokiteśvara's hands, and Amitābha swiftly does the same.[158] In a more developed redaction, we read, perhaps more explicitly,

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[154] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 364.4; MKB *K, mdo skor*, fol. 78v, l. 3–fol. 81r, l. 1; *MKB O, kha*, fol. 67r, l. 6–fol. 69r, l. 5; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 167.3–fol. 172.3; MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 84r, l. 1–fol. 86v, l. 1.

[155] Derge 116, fol. 210v, l. 7.

[156] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 364.4, fol. 372.4 and fol. 396.3. MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 156.4, fol. 165.5–fol. 167.3. Note that the latter citation is missing from the manuscripts MKB *K*, *L*, *O*, and *T* (MKB *K, mdo skor*, fol. 78v, l. 3; MKB *L, kha*, fol. 65v, l. 6; MKB *O, kha*, fol. 67r, l. 6; MKB *T, ka*, fol. 87r, l. 1) and is missing in the block print *R*, too, where the lacuna was noted and marked with an X (MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 84r, l. 1). As MKB *R*'s editors realised, this was surely an erroneous omission, as the relevant chapter announces the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* among the set of scriptures quoted within it (MKB *K, mdo skor*, fol. 73v, l. 8–fol. 74r, l.1; MKB *L, kha*, fol. 62r, l. 6; MKB *O, kha*, fol. 63r, l. 7; MKB *R*, vol. *ka*, fol. 79r, l. 5; MKB *T, ka*, fol. 82r, l. 5).

[157] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 371.4–fol. 373.4.

[158] *Pillar Testament D*, fol. 372.6–fol. 373.4.

of Tibet as the "realm to be disciplined by Mahākāruṇika".[159] In an early witness of the *Zangs gling ma* we read that "the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara Mahākāruṇika accepted [the role of] general deity [of] the Kingdom of Snowy Tibet," a passage that also refers to Tibet as "the realm to be disciplined" by the bodhisattva.[160] The unique tie between Avalokiteśvara and the land of Tibet also lucidly appears in the dedicatory verses in the MKB's work attributed to Ngödrup:

> Avalokiteśvara, who observes all six [classes] of beings,
> acts like a mother, [his] compassion pervading everyone.
> Having recognised this kingdom of snowclad Tibet
> as his missionary object, he works as Tibet's assigned deity.[161]

Successive steps, naturally flowing from the notion that Avalokiteśvara was ever present and vigilant to further the Tibetans' weal, would presumably have seen ever more roles ascribed to Avalokiteśvara. As demonstrated above, he came to feature in an increasing number of Buddhist stories and historical narratives as he was grafted onto figures such as Śākyamuni and Gaganagañja in the *Great History*, and onto key historical figures from the Tibetan past in the *Pillar Testament*.

Similarly, the ancestor of the Tibetans, too, came to be considered an emanation of the bodhisattva. This most famous origin narrative of the Tibetans, which prominently features Avalokiteśvara (either as actual forebear or as instigator of the Tibetans' genesis), is still completely absent from several 12th- and 13th-century Buddhist historiographies such as the Tholing Manuscript, and the works by Nel pa Paṇḍiṭa and Mkhas pa lDe'u. This suggests that at that time, the narrative did not yet carry substantial cultural force among Buddhist historians but was still struggling to cross over from devotional treasure literature.[162] Brief references to the myth in

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[159] *Pillar Testament S*, 67.6: *thugs rje chen pos 'dul ba'i zhing khams*.

[160] *Zangs gling ma*, witness *i*, fol. 86_2v, ll. 3–4: *byang chub sems dpa' spyan ras gzigs thugs rje chen po 'di/ /bod kha ba can gyi rgyal khams spyi mthun gyi lhar zhal gyis bzhes nas/ /des 'dul ba'i zhing khams legs par gda' bas/* (with variant readings in *Zangs gling ma*, witness *h*, fol. 107v, l. 4–fol. 108r, l. 1).

[161] MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 583.5; MKB *K*, *'grel pa*, fol. 43v, ll. 7–8: *'gro drug kun la gzigs pa'i spyan ras gzigs/ /thugs rje kun la khyab cing* [K: *pa'i*] *ma ltar mdzad/ /bod yul kha ba can gyi rgyal khams 'di/ /gdul byar gzigs nas bod kyi lha skal mdzad/*.

[162] Note that Pritzker does interpret a passage in the Tholing Manuscript as presenting an origin narrative of the Tibetans (David T. Pritzker, "Canopy of Everlasting Joy: An Early Source in Tibetan Historiography and the History of West Tibet" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2017), 78–83). The passage however carries no reference to Avalokiteśvara, and,

the 12th-century *Chos la 'jug pa'i sgo*[163] and even the early-14th-century history by Butön Rinchendrup (1290–1364, Tib. Bu ston Rin chen grub)[164] merely mention a monkey, but not Avalokiteśvara's involvement—let alone his being the Tibetans' physical ancestor. This echoes the above finding (3.2) that Avalokiteśvara only starts appearing as the people's forebear in more developed redactions of the *Pillar Testament*.[165] The bodhisattva's role as the Tibetans' forefather is evidently a somewhat later one, resulting from his cult's expanding sway.

The bodhisattva's growing role met and merged with an increasing focus on the six-syllable *mantra*. The *mantra*'s clout is already abundantly evident in the MKB works attributed to the 12th-century Ngödrup and Nyang-rel. Those works' materials on the six-syllable *mantra* resonate with the earliest extant redactions of the *Copper Island*, which also contain substantial content devoted to the *mantra*.[166] All three works alike, in fact, contain related phrasing on the *mantra*'s individual syllables "cutting off the precipice of [re]birth" in one of the six different realms, thereby assigning each single syllable liberatory power over a particular domain of life.[167] This combination of sources, all with plausible claims to a 12th-century provenance, appears sufficient to conclude that by this time

more importantly, I doubt that this passage concerns the Tibetans at all. It is embedded within material on the rulers of Tibet and makes no mention of "the Tibetans" or "subjects."

[163] *Chos la 'jug pa'i sgo*, fol. 623.3–623.5.

[164] János Szerb, *Bu ston's History of Buddhism in Tibet: Critically Edited with a Comprehensive Index* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 2.

[165] One notable attestation of the ancestor's identification with Avalokiteśvara is found in early witnesses of the *Zangs gling ma* (*h*, fol. 108v, ll. 1–5; *i*, fol. 87r, l. 3–fol. 87v, l. 1). The chronological and genealogical relations between Nyang-rel's narrative works, the historiographies contained in MKB collections, and representatives of the *Pillar Testament* tradition remain to be investigated in detail.

[166] *Zangs gling ma*, witness *h*, fol. 109r, l. 2–fol. 14v, l. 1, fol. 114v, l. 1–fol. 118r, l. 3; *Zangs gling ma*, witness *i*, fol. 87v, l. 3–fol. 93v, l. 2, fol. 93v, l. 2–fol. 97r, l. 2.

[167] *Zangs gling ma*, witness *h*, fol. 114r, ll. 1–4; *Zangs gling ma*, witness *i*, fol. 93r, ll. 3–5; MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 500.1–500.5; vol. *waṃ*, fol. 87.1–87.6. One example of such overlaps: *oṃ gyis ltar* [= *lhar*] *skye ba'i g.yang sa bcad* [...] etc. (*Zangs gling ma*, witness *i*, fol. 93r, l. 3) and *oṃ ye shes rang gsal 'di bzlas pas*/ [...] *lha ru skye ba'i g.yang sa gcod*/ (MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 500.1 and vol. *waṃ*, fol. 86.7–fol. 87.1). Note that the passages in Ngödrup's and Nyang-rel's texts are identical, which applies to the surrounding text as well, and again for their texts starting at MKB *P*, vol. *e*, fol. 501.3 and vol. *waṃ*, fol. 87.6.

Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable *mantra* had attained substantial standing in some religious quarters, confirming Phillips' earlier findings.[168]

Yet pivotally, the *mantra* did not yet enjoy any particular standing in the seemingly most archaic extant redaction of the *Pillar Testament* (*D*). *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ* may well have entered that work only in the 13th century, the earliest possible date for most of the redactions in which the *mantra* features with any degree of prominence.[169] By the time that century rolled around, however, the *mantra* would swiftly see its influence snowball. In the MKB collections, which appeared in recognisable shape either in the 13th or 14th century (certainly prior to the 1370s),[170] the *mantra* would already feature centrally and throughout. By the 15th century, the *mantra* had achieved sufficient popularity for a Buddhist historian to claim that *Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ* was on everybody's lips.[171]

The absence of Avalokiteśvara's typically Tibetan mythology and his six-syllable *mantra* from the Dunhuang manuscripts has long invited comment from scholars. The careful though enticing suggestion by van Schaik that pivotal characteristics of the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara cult might have roots that predate the "later propagation of Buddhism" after all,[172] however, can now convincingly be put to rest. As we have seen, there is a substantial disconnect between sources from the Tibetan Plateau and Dunhuang materials, and these differences are due not to geographic, but temporal distance. Central elements of the bodhisattva cult as it would develop in Tibet were simply not yet in existence when the library cave in Dunhuang was walled off in the early 11th century Although the bodhisattva certainly enjoyed reverence prior to this period, the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara mythology, with all elements so particular to it, is chiefly the child of the "later propagation of Buddhism," and would mature in the centuries to follow.

[168] Phillips, "Consummation." I would however reject Phillips' thesis that it was the 13th-century Guru Chöwang who was the key vector in popularising the *mantra*, as Guru Chöwang promoted a seven-syllable version of it (*Oṃ ma ṇi pad me hūṃ hrīḥ*).

[169] On the dating of the redactions, see Langelaar, "Replacing a Pillar," section 4.

[170] See the discussion concerning the *Yar lung chos 'byung* on p. 24.

[171] See fn. 1.

[172] Van Schaik, "The Tibetan Avalokiteśvara Cult."

Abbreviations

BDRC	The Buddhist Digital Resource Center, https://library.bdrc.io/.
IOM RAS	Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences.
MKB	*Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* (see bibliography).
NGMPP	Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project
P. T.	Pelliot Collection of Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

Symbols

[…]	omission
_	empty space in *umé* manuscripts (instead of *shad*)
:	double-dotted interpunction (instead of *shad*)
{*gcig*}	Tibetan numerals rendered as text

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MKB *K* = *Chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po'i gsung/ Thugs rje chen po'i bka' 'bum skor gsum* [Pronouncements of the Dharma King Songtsen the Wise: Collected Works on Mahākāruṇika, in Three Cycles]. Microfilm of an *umé* manuscript (614 fols), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, NGMPP L 419/10.

MKB *L* = *Thugs rje chen po'i chos skyong ba'i rgyal po srong btsan sgam po mdzad pa'i lo rgyus chen mo* [The *Great History* Composed [by] Songtsen the Wise, the King Protecting Mahākāruṇika's Dharma]. Microfilm of an *umé* manuscript (76 fols), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, NGMPP L 13/3.

MKB *O* = *Chos skyong pa'i rgyal po srong tsan rgam po'i bka' 'bum chos spyi'i dkar chag bzhugs sho/ 'dir(?) chos skyong pa'i rgyal po drong tsan rgam pos mdzad*

pa'i thugs rje chen po'i chos skor mdo bskor sgrub bskor zhal gdams kyi skor rnams dkar chag gi kha byang bla ma rgyud rims kyi 'brel chags bzhugs sho / [A General Catalogue for the Collected Works of the Dharma-Protecting King Songtsen the Wise: Continuity of the Successive Generations of Lamas, a Guide to the Catalogue [of] the Sūtra, Sādhana and Advice Cycles [from among the] Dharma Cycles relating to Mahākāruṇika that were Composed by the Dharma-Protecting King [S]ongtsen the Wise]. Photographic reproduction of an *umé* manuscript (562 fols), EAP105/2/1/180. Available online at https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP105-2-1-180. Last accessed May 15, 2024.

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Zangs gling ma, witness *i* = reproduction of a microfilm of an *uchen* manuscript (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, NGMPP E 1217/2) in Doney, *Zangs gling ma*, 224–326.

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