Shakabpa begins his historical account by narrating the ancient history of Tibet in detail, focusing particularly on legends concerning the origins of the royal lineage, the sequence of events that introduced Buddhism on the Tibetan plateau, the creation of a written form of the Tibetan language, and the entry of Tibet into history. Many of the sources reporting on that era do not distinguish between history and legend, and Shakabpa himself does not endeavor to separate these threads critically. This chapter covers the period from prehistory to the 9th century. Interestingly, Shakabpa provides almost no information about the pre-Buddhist Bön religion or the Zhang Zhung culture in Tibet, a tradition that greatly occupies the historical narratives of the advocates of the Bön faith.

Shakabpa recounts several legends about the origins of the Tibetan royal family. Nyatri Tsenpo, who is said to have been the first king of Tibet, established the royal lineage at Yarlung. He is depicted as the son of Makgyapa, the king of Magadha in Bihar, India, the same kingdom that was ruled by King Bimbisāra, the noted royal patron of Buddha Śākyamuni. This narrative detail helps to legitimize the Buddhist credentials of the Tibetan royal family. Nyatri Tsenpo and the next six kings do not have tombs in Tibet because, we are told, they ascended into the sky at the ends of their lives. Beginning with the eighth, tombs were constructed in the Yarlung Valley to the southeast of Lhasa.

The twenty-sixth king after Nyatri Tsenpo was Lhato Tori Nyentsen, born in the year 173 C.E. He was regarded as a propitious sovereign who presided over the first appearance of Buddhist artifacts in Tibet when a book of scriptures and some statues, called the “Fierce Secret,” appeared on the roof of his palace. At the same time, it was prophesied that the meaning of these things would be understood five generations later, a prophecy that seems to have been realized during the reign of Songtsen Gampo (605/617–650), actually only four generations later.

A historical figure, many fantastic legends feature him and his family, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fantasy. He is said to have ignited the emergence of Buddhism in Tibet by obtaining a devoutly Buddhist bride from the royal families of both China and Nepal, each of whom brought statues—Jowo Śākyamuni and Jowo Mikyö Dorjé respectively—that would continue to be important in Tibetan history up to the present day. They also created the Jokhang Tsuklakhang Temple that is at the sacred center of Tibetan Buddhism and also Ramoché Temple. Songtsen Gampo is also remembered as a great patron of Buddhism because it was through his support that a royal minister, Tönmi Sambhoṭa, spent years in India learning Sanskrit and creating a written form of the Tibetan language. When he returned to Tibet, some of the scholars who accompanied him from India translated the text that had earlier come into the possession of Nyatri Tsenpo.

From among his many wives, the Chinese Princess Wencheng Gongzhu and the Nepali Princess Bhrikuti Devi are mentioned most prominently. The Chinese consort is depicted as being more knowledgeable in such important matters as geomancy and temple construction, and she is the senior wife of the king in all respects. Songtsen Gampo also built a palace on the Red Hill in the Lhasa Valley, a site that would later be developed into the Potala Palace. It is with this king that Tibet entered fully into the international realm, capable of invading mighty neighbors, demanding princesses in bridal alliances, and engaging in broad-reaching intercultural exchanges. While Gartongtsen, Songtsen Gampo’s minister, served as regent for the minor heir, he continued

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