The mGon khang of dPe thub (Spituk):\textsuperscript{1} A Rare Example of 15th Century Tibetan Painting from Ladakh

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Historical Background

According to the Chronicles of Ladakh,\textsuperscript{2} dPe thub (Spituk) monastery (Figure 9.1) was founded by 'Od lde, the ruler of Gu ge, in a Rat year in the 11th century, which in all likelihood corresponds to 1048 C.E.\textsuperscript{3} It seems that the monastery subsequently went into decline. All that remains of this first monastery are the two caves known as Brag khung kha ba chen, ‘Snowy Caves’, which lie near the present monastery in the village on the far bank of the Indus, and the outer shell of the mGon khang.

The contents of the Chronicles are also extremely useful in reconstructing the political history of Ladakh at this time: the founding by ‘Od lde of a monastery in the middle of the region, very near Leh, which at the time was an important entrepôt, is a sign of the strong political influence exercised by the kingdom of Gu ge over Ladakh.

The fortunes of the monastery of dPe thub were later restored under the ruler Grags 'bum lde, a builder of temples who was renowned for having contributed greatly to the spiritual renaissance of Ladakh after a period of complex political and religious fluctuations. His reign lasted roughly from 1450 to 1490 (Lo Bue 2007:184), and he therefore probably ordered dPe thub to be rebuilt in the late 15th century. The project was undertaken in commemoration of a visit to the kingdom of Ladakh made by two followers of Tsong kha pa in 1461.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1} My warmest thanks go to my friends in the monastery of dPe thub, who kindly allowed me to photograph the paintings in the temple.

\textsuperscript{2} La dvags rgyal rabs, recorded from the 17th century onwards (Petech 1977:1).

\textsuperscript{3} As pointed out by Erberto Lo Bue (Lo Bue & Bellini, forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{4} Sending emissaries in his place must have been normal practice for Tsong kha pa. He is known to have been invited to China in 1408 by the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Chengzu (generally known as Yongle, from the name of his period), but once again declined the offer, sending a pupil in his stead (Snellgrove 1987:81).
The 15th century in Ladakh was marked by the rise to political power of the dGe lugs pa, due above all to the actions of the charismatic figure of Shes rab bzang po (Figure 9.2), the master who was associated with the very arrival of the order in Ladakh. A native of Mar yul and follower of Tsong kha pa, he

According to the sources mentioned above, he came from Ladakh and became a follower of Tsong kha pa before founding the sTag mo lha khang to the north of Khrig se (Thikse) and the monastery of the same name. He is portrayed in a statue in the hermitage of sTag mo, to which E. Lo Bue kindly drew my attention. He is depicted in a cave as a master accompanied by two pupils. One of these is rJe dPal ldan Shes rab, corresponding to rJe drung dPal ldan Shes rab, the nephew of Shes rab bzang po, who became the first dGe lugs pa abbot of the monastery of Phug tal in Zanskar (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980:42).

The follower depicted next to Shes rab with the name of slob dpon 'Do sde, might be slob dpon mDo sde rin chen, who is said to have founded the dGe lugs pa monastery of Chos sde dKar rgyas, in Zangs dkar, and added extensions to Phug tal and dKar sha, where dPal ldan Shes rab was also active (Tucci 1971:485).