PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE MANUSCRIPTS OF GNAS GSAR DGON PA IN NORTHERN DOLPO (NEPAL)

AMY HELLER
(CNRS PARIS, UMR 8047 ‘LANGUES ET CULTURES DE L’AIRE TIBÉTAINE’, ASSOCIATE MEMBER)

This article will discuss data compiled from a corpus of 640 volumes of late 12th to early 16th century manuscripts conserved in Gnas gsar dgon pa, in the small village of Bi cer, recorded on maps as Vijar, Phijor or Pijor, in northern Dolpo, near the Tibetan border (Figure 1 Map). Although the village name Bi cer has been given modern ‘volk’etymology as byi bcer, ‘crushed mouse’ (condensed from byi ba, mouse, and beer ba, to squeeze, to press) this seems most unlikely. In both Gro shod and in Glo, there is a town named Byi ba mkhar. The signification of mkhar as fortress is well established, but as a town name, ‘mouse fortress’ seems unlikely. This implies that there may be another signification to byi ba, possibly local dialect of western Tibet/western Himalaya or possibly related to certain ancient Bon po deities. In the dedication prefaces of the Bi cer manuscripts, the spelling is frequently bi jer or bi cer, although the actual pronunciation is much closer to ‘vi che’. This may reflect instead a mixed Tibetan and

1 For a preliminary report on this library, emphasising the illuminations, and initial findings on the history of the dgon pa, see, Heller 2001. Here I will present subsequent findings on the manuscripts, their dedications and their history, summarising where necessary the previous data. I gratefully acknowledge constructive criticism from Giacomella Orofino and Roberto Vitali.

2 There is considerable variation in the spelling of the name of the town. Officially the spelling as written in Nepali English is Vijer; several Tibetan spellings are found in the manuscripts and village documents: Bi jer, Bi cer, Bi cher, Byi cer, Byi cher, Byi jer, Bi tse ra.

3 This etymology was explained in May 2000, by the village lama of Bi cer, Bstan ’dzin rgyal mtshan, who subsequently published this explanation in his history of Dolpo and Bi cer (see bibliography).

4 Vitali 1997: 1027 (fn. 14) calls attention to the need to differentiate between these two Byi ba mkhar. See also Everding 2000: 528 (fn. 1363) on Byi ba mkhar and the pass Byi rdo la in upper Dolpo.

5 I thank Lama Shes rab bstan ’dzin of the Bon po monastery Bsam gling, near Bi cer village, for discussion on this possible Bon po etymology.
Sanskrit etymology. If bi is the Tibetan rendition of the Sanskrit vi, this could suggest a short form of Sanskrit vihara, sanctuary, combined with a short form of Tibetan che ba or chen po, great, i.e. vihara che ba, ‘the great sanctuary’ which, in view of the exceptional quality and quantity of ancient books found here, might well express a religious and political status of the village in former times. For now, although the etymology remains uncertain, it is clear that all these spellings do refer to one and the same village in which the Gnas gsar dgon pa was built.

The existence of this library has been known for some time, thanks to publications by the English Tibetologist David Snellgrove and French anthropologist Corneille Jest resulting from their visits in 1956 and 1961. Snellgrove recognised a complete set of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon in the library as well as a large gilt statue of Maitreya. Jest recorded two different local traditions about these books, both linking their arrival to patronage of Buddhism in Dolpo by kings of Dzumla, one of whom was Bsod nams lde alias Punyamalla, who reigned in Dzumla ca. 1336–1339, after long ruling over Pu hrang. After the visits by Jest and Snellgrove, very few western travellers saw the library due to restricted tourist access to Dolpo. In 1993, as participants in the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project, several Dolpo monasteries presented their ancient books for microfilming. At this time, a

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6 I thank Tsuguhito Takeuchi for suggesting the idea of a mixed Sanskrit-Tibetan etymology for the name of the village.

7 Although in some manuscripts the expression Gnas gsar dgon pa is found, in general one finds instead Gnas gsar gtsug lag khang, which does seem to better render the actual conditions of the temple. I doubt that there was ever an active monastery of live-in monks in the Tibetan sense of the term in this village; rather, monks would come to reside and make retreat or celebrate rituals, but frequently travelled. There was not the community of monks nor the residences for them, as far as I have been able to determine.


9 Jest 1975: 55 and 361. Kagar Rinpoche, Jest’s principal informant, told him that Koleal, a king of Dzumla, was the benefactor of Shey dgon pa near Bi cer, and had given the volumes of the Tibetan canon to sixteen brothers living in Bi cer. Jest also recorded the tradition that a king of Dzumla named Bsod nams had been the benefactor of Bi cer, donating several gilt copper statues as well as this Bka’ ’gyur and Bstan ’gyur. This was a gesture of gratitude. The local lama of Bi cer had saved the Dzumla population from an epidemic by celebrating a sku rim ritual, thus the king exempted the population from taxes for eighteen years, which provided funds to purchase the texts. Jest (1985: 90) gives the full name of the Dzumla king as Bsod nams lde.

10 His patronage of Tibetan lamas was earlier studied by Petech 1980: 85–111, but see Vitali 1996: 463–69 for a recent and most detailed discussion of Bsod nams lde, and his reign in Pu hrang and Dzumla.