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Chapter2 The royal houses in Gyalrong

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Chapter 2 The royal houses in Gyalrong

The sources that contain an account in any detail of the Khro chen royal house in Gyalrong are extremely rare. However, in his *SG* Kun grol grags pa (b.1700) has given the genealogy (*Khro chen gdung rabs*) of the Khro chen family. It is in fact simply a list of a series of male descendants of the family. He states that this genealogy was based on a historical work entitled *rGyal rabs shel dkar phreng ba*, but he does not give any information concerning this work.¹ Its author and dates therefore remain unknown. As of 2003, it has not been available to me for consultation. It would be of considerable interest for the local history if it is still extant. The same genealogy is also given in *NG* by bKa' bcu gYung drung phun tshogs, a disciple of Kun grol, but this is based on his master's work, mentioned above.

In listing the names of the genealogy, both Kun grol and his disciple keep the usual formula which is *de'i sras*, "son of that" or "his son" even though two brothers' names precede it. The term *sras* does not necessarily always only mean son, and in such a context as this, it just designates a male descendant. One assumes that the two brothers had one wife. At any rate, the names of wives are never mentioned. Likewise no names of daughters are given either. It is therefore impossible to know how many brothers and sisters there were when it is simply stated that a particular person is the eldest of five children. The total absence of any information concerning the queens, their names and social and geographical origins prevents us knowing anything about the relationship of the Khro chen royal family with other principalities in Gyalrong or elsewhere. This is also the case with the genealogy of the Rab brtan royal house in Chu chen which we shall see below. The genealogies of Khro chen and the Rab brtan royal families are therefore solely viewed according to the patriarchal lineage in their own region.

Here is the genealogy of the Khro chen royal family given in *SG* (f.531a-533a):

1. Khro tsha dBang ldan
2. Khro chen sTag la skyabs (one of three brothers, the others not named)
3. A dkar
4. Yo phya
5. gYung drung rgyal ba and mKhar thar (both brothers ruled)
6. Nang so gSar ma and A dkar ze (brothers?)
7. Ban dhe rgyal
8. Khro rgyal
9. Tsi li
10. Khro rgyal ma chen (elder of two brothers, younger one bSod nams)
11. Kun dga' nor bu (second of four children, elder Nang so Nam mkha' dbang ldan, youngest Nang so gYung drung bstan 'dzin, the fourth not named)²

Kun dga' nor bu, the eleventh king [Pl.21], was the second of four children. The elder brother was Nang so Nam mkha' dbang ldan who was a monk and the third brother was Nang so gYung drung bstan 'dzin who was also a monk and head of the monastery bKra shis smin grol gling. They both became disciples of Kun grol and played a very important role in the project of engraving woodblocks of the Bon Canon as we shall see. Kun grol was the spiritual master of Kun dga' nor bu, king of Khro skyabs, and Nam mkha' rgyal po, king of Chu chen and bsTan 'dzin nor bu, king of dGe bshes tsa.

The palace of the Khro chen kings was initially called Khro chen 'brug mo rdzong, but was later changed to Drug zur rNam par rgyal ba'i rdzong by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1705-1735). It was razed during the Cultural Revolution. Only the six cornered stone tower was still standing in 1985 when I made a brief visit to Gyalrong. Below the tower was a large space and beaten ground. It was flat and empty where once stood the famous Khro chen palace which amongst other things housed the woodblocks of the Bon Kanjur [Pl. 22-27]. On its west corner was bTsun mo lha khang, the temple of the queen, in a dilapidated condition [Pl. 28-29]. It had all the appearance of being abandoned and yet it still had beautiful wall paintings. Some of these painting were desecrated by writing over them in Chinese characters in black ink [Pl. 30-39]. I was told that the commune needed a building to be used as a granary during the Cultural Revolution and the temple served for that purpose and that was why it was saved from total destruction. On a modern map the whole area is named Drug zur.³

King Kun dga' nor bu and his queen Tshe dbang lha mo had two sons, but unfortunately the author of *NG* apparently forgot to mention their names.⁴ He simply states that the elder brother and crown prince was expected to succeed his father and his younger brother became a monk and was looking after the monastery mTshon to Ngo mtshar nor bu gling [Pl. 40a-40b], the main monastery of the Khro chen royal house.⁵

gYung drung phun tshogs comments: "Although Tibet has lately come to be governed by the emperor, the one designated by heaven and who is Manjuśrī in person, this king (Kun dga' nor bu) was on good terms with the emperor and many villages of the area were allowed to remain under his rule..."⁶ This cautious statement suggests that the Khro chen kings had a relatively easy relation with the Manchu court whereas Chu chen had not. It is significant that he made no mention of Chu chen principality in this context. Chu chen was, as will be seen, at logger-heads with the Manchus. This suggests that the principalities of Khro skyabs and Chu chen were subject to the diplomatic manoeuvring of the Manchus to keep them apart. This question will be further discussed below.

The Rab brtan royal family in Chu chen and its genealogy

The Genealogy of the Rab brtan Royal house (*Rab brtan gdung rabs*)

1. bTsan cung
2. Khro ti
3. Ye 'bum dkar po
4. Zhal dkar
5. Yul 'khor
6. gSer sgong tshang yig
7. bKa' rtags
8. Lig ver
9. Ne ver
10. Ting ver
11. Slas ver
12. Drung can
13. gYung drung
14. Ser 'bum
15. gYu rin
16. Rin chen
17. dNgul 'khor
18. gSer 'dzin
19. dNgul gyi thor tshugs
20. Rus sbal dung rna
21. Mang mkhar sgom blo
22. mKhar sgom skyabs
23. sMad pa ta yo shes
24. A skyabs
25. Kha tin ye 'bum
26. Khro bo 'bum rgyal
27. Grags rgyal a vang (eldest of 4 brothers)
28. gYung drung 'bum (second of 3 brothers)
29. rNam rgyal grags pa
30. Khro bo rgyal po (second of 3 brothers)
31. Tshe dbang don grub
32. A drung
33. Grags rgyal (second of 5 children)
34. rDo rje rgyal (second of 5 children)
35. Zla ba
36. 'Brug rgyal (first of 2 brothers)
37. A khro (second of 4 children)
38. lHa 'bum I (third of 3 brothers)
39. rDo rje rgyal po (second of 2 brothers)

40. lHa 'bum II (second of 2 brothers)
41. Di sung
42. lHa dbang rdo rje (second of 5 children)
43. rDo rje rgyal (second of 5 children)
44. Nam mkha' rgyal po (eldest of 5 children)
45. bSod nams dbang rgyal (third of five brothers, the others were Gong bdag rgyal po, Klu dbang rgya mtsho, Grags rgal and sTon pa rje).

bSod nams dbang rgyal,⁷ the 45th king, was the last king of Chu chen and this is known from other sources including the 'edict' [Pl. 41] of which I already made a translation.⁸ His brothers Gong bdag rgyal po and Klu dbang rgya mtsho were apparently monks since their names are given in the inscription⁹ as Slob dpon Tshul khrim dbang ldan and bSod nams phun tshogs rgyal ba 'od zer.

So far I found no other Tibetan source for information concerning the names of this genealogy. In the colophon of another text written by Kun grol grags pa, a royal personage called Rab brtan slob dpon, the Slob dpon of Rab brtan is mentioned along with the name Nam mkha' rgyal po.¹⁰ He describes them as 'rulers' (*sa skyong*). However, the identity of Rab brtan slob dpon remains rather obscure. Chinese sources state that Nam mkha' rgyal po¹¹ was the 'son of the elder brother of the Slob dpon'.¹² As is clear from the genealogy given above, Nam mkha' rgyal po's father was rDo rje rgyal, the 43rd king. If the Chinese sources are correct, it would seem that Rab brtan slob dpon was a brother of the king rDo rje rgyal. It is stated that in Gyalrong the term *slob dpon*, 'teacher' is used as a title for an elder brother of the reigning king¹³ and this is correct only in the case of the Rab brtan royal family in Chu chen. In the royal family of Khro skyabs, the title is Nang so for all the brothers of the reigning king.

Rab brtan slob dpon was a monk in the Bon monastery called dGa' ldan g-yung drung gling. I presume he held an important position in the monastery, probably the chief teacher.

It is strange that *NG* is totally silent in general about Chu chen principality although the engraving of woodblocks of the *Khams chen* took place there in 1764 and there was a military conflict between its people and the Manchu army in 1773 in which year the author of *NG* completed his work.

According to Kun grol, King Nam mkha' rgyal po, the father of bSod nams dbang rgyal, took the vows of *dge bsnjen* from him and he gave him the name Nam mkha' g-yung drung ye shes.¹⁴ Kun grol further states that in the presence of the Lama bSod nams rgyal mtshan the king later took the full ordination as a monk. This is interesting to note. As Kun grol himself was no longer a monk, he would not have been able to confer the ordination. Hence the king had to take it from another lama. Nam mkha' rgyal po therefore in his later life did not remain as king of the Chu chen principality.

No date is available as to when he was succeeded by his son, bSod nams dbang rgyal. It was bSod nams dbang rgyal who commanded his forces to resist the Manchu invasion from 1771 to 1776.

There were two palaces of the Rab brtan royal family, one was called rNam par rgyal ba'i rdzong situated in Li ver which was the capital of Chu chen. It was in this palace where Kun grol compiled the catalogue of the Bon Kanjur in 1751.¹⁵ The other palace was called 'Gyur med pho brang located in bKwa' rmgom where Kun grol edited the *Khams chen* in 1764 for the engraving of the woodblocks. In the same year the engraving was completed, but his *par byang* was written only in 1768 when Kun grol was aged 67.

The Rab brtan royal house's main monastery was gYung drung lha sding. The last syllable of the name *sding* is pronounced in Gyalrong as 'teng' hence often written as steng. No source that I have seen indicates who or when it was founded apart from the inscription of which I have made a partial translation in chapter 5.

The royal house of dGe bshes tsa was also very active in supporting the efforts of Kun grol's work in Gyalrong. The royal palace was called sByi bSam 'grub seng ge rdzong. No sources that I have found so far give any account of its royal lineage. It was lama gYung drung bstan 'dzin of this royal family who founded the monastery bKra shis smin grol gling in Nyag rong in 1689 and in 1735 a reincarnation of him was born in the same family. He was called 'Chi med grub dbang.

In the mid-eighteenth century, as we have seen in chapter 1, the king bsTan 'dzin nor bu of dGe bshes tsa competed with other royal houses in hosting Sangs rgyas gling pa and Kun grol grags pa. It was a prince-monk named gSang sngags grags pa *alias* Ye shes snying po of the royal house who was first instrumental in inviting Sangs rgyas gling pa to Gyalrong. The main monastery of the royal family was lHun grub dpag gling where in 1730 both Sangs rgyas gling pa and Kun grol often resided in their first days in Gyalrong.

There is hardly any information in Tibetan sources about the royal house of bTsan la. In the mid-eighteenth century its chieftain was called Tshe dbang and his family was related by blood to that of the Rab brtan royal house. His son was Seng ge bzang po¹⁶ who was a strong ally with the principality of Chu chen in resisting the Manchus during their campaign against Gyalrong.

¹ SG f. 532a.

² In his *KK* (p.257) Kun grol mentions a king of Khro skyabs called Khro chen rgyal po Tshe brtan dpal 'byor, but this name is not mentioned in the genealogy. In 1920 there were two prince brothers: Tshe dbang nor 'dzin and lHa dbang nor bu (*KhGG* p. 298) and in 1955 the king was called sKal bzang rgyal mtshan, see chapter 3.

³ rNga ba bod rigs cha'ng rigs rang skyong khul gyi sa khra. No date of its publication is given.

⁴ NG f. 13b.

- ⁵ Survey No. 188.
- ⁶ *NG* f. 13a.
- ⁷ Chinese: Sonuomu (Mansier 1990: 129). In *rNga ba khul sa gnas lo rgyus*, compiled by rNga ba khul sa gnas lo rgyus rtsom sgrig u yon lhan khang and published in 1996 by Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, p.284, this name is also written as bSod nams 'bum.
- ⁸ Karmay 1998a: No. 3.
- ⁹ Chapter 5, ll. 18-19.
- ¹⁰ *NyBZ* p. 257.
- ¹¹ According to Mansier (1990: 129), this is transcribed by the Chinese as Langka.
- ¹² Mansier 1990: 129. The title is transcribed as Shaluoben by the Chinese.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 129, n.12
- ¹⁴ *SG* of the Chu ch'en edition, f.377a.
- ¹⁵ *KK* pp. 257-58.
- ¹⁶ Chinese: Senggesang (Mansier 1990: 129).



Pl. 21 King Kun dga' nor bu, from the folio 537a, Vol. A of the *Khams chen*, Khro skyabs edition, Bya 'phur, sNang zhig dgon, rNga khog, Amdo, SGK 1985



Pl. 22 Site of the palace of the Khro skyabs kings, Gyalrong, SGK 1985



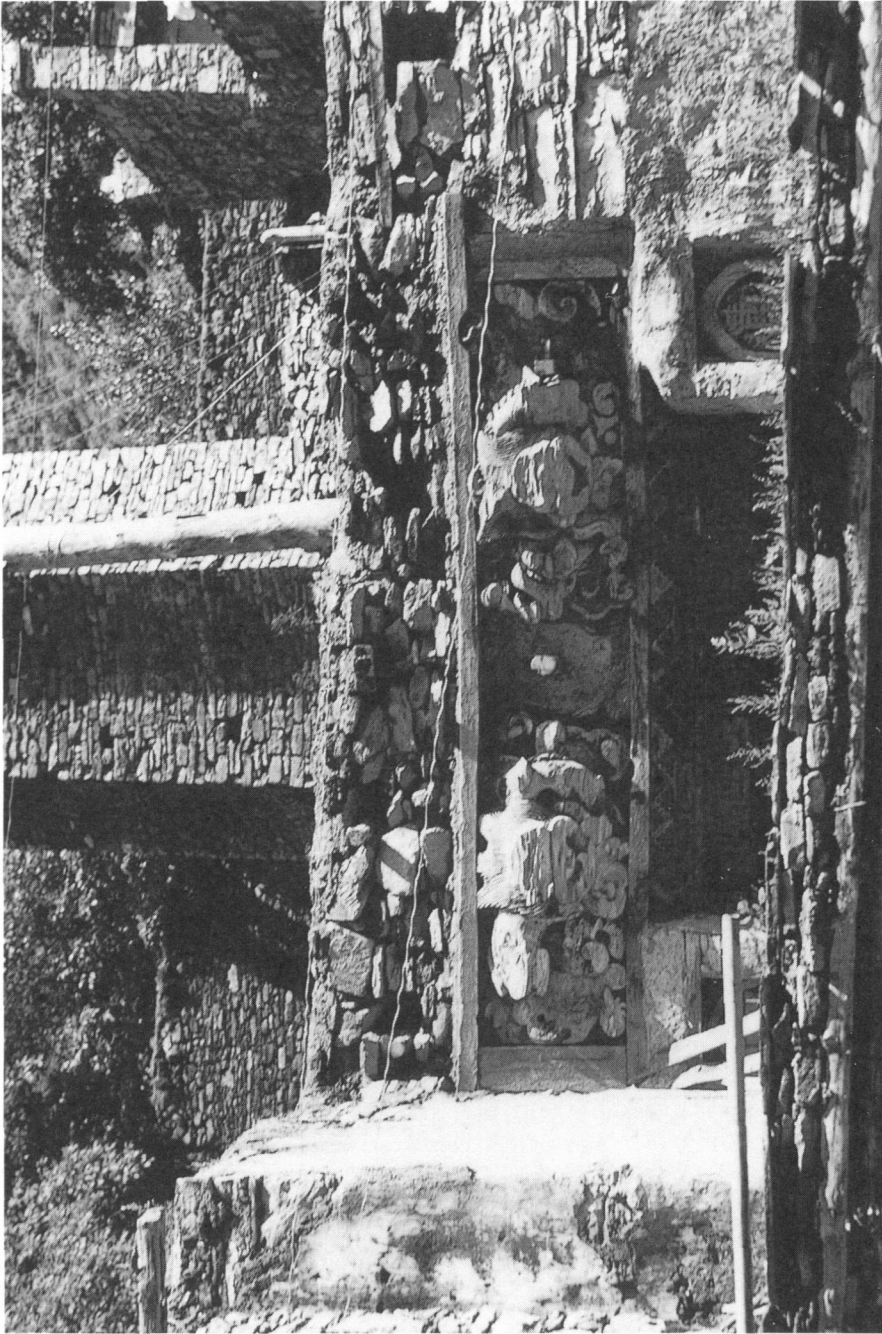
Pl. 23 The stone tower known as Drug zur ('hexagonal') stood behind the palace of the Khro skyabs kings, SGK 1985



PI. 24 Detail of the PI. 23



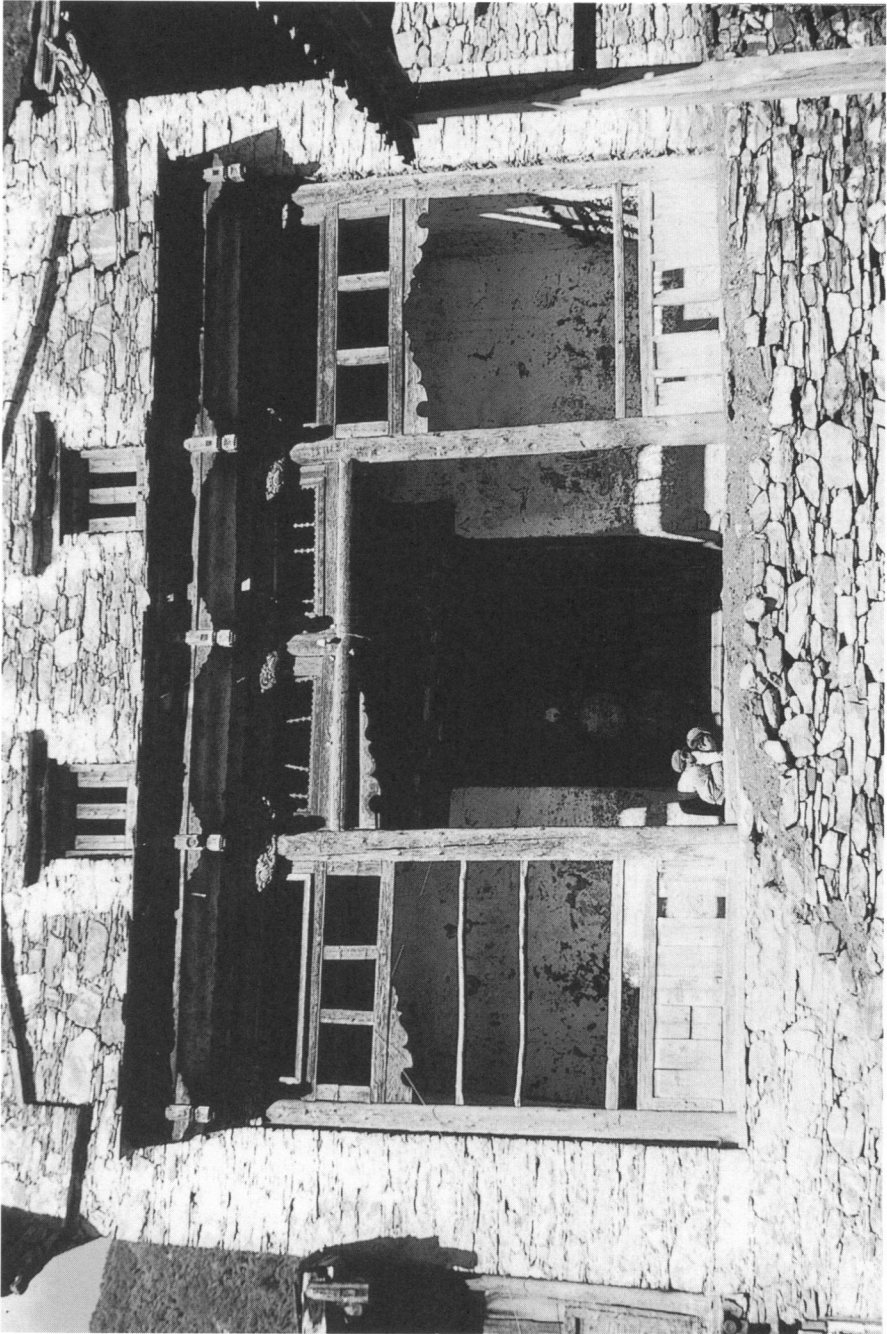
Pl. 25 Detail of the Pl. 23



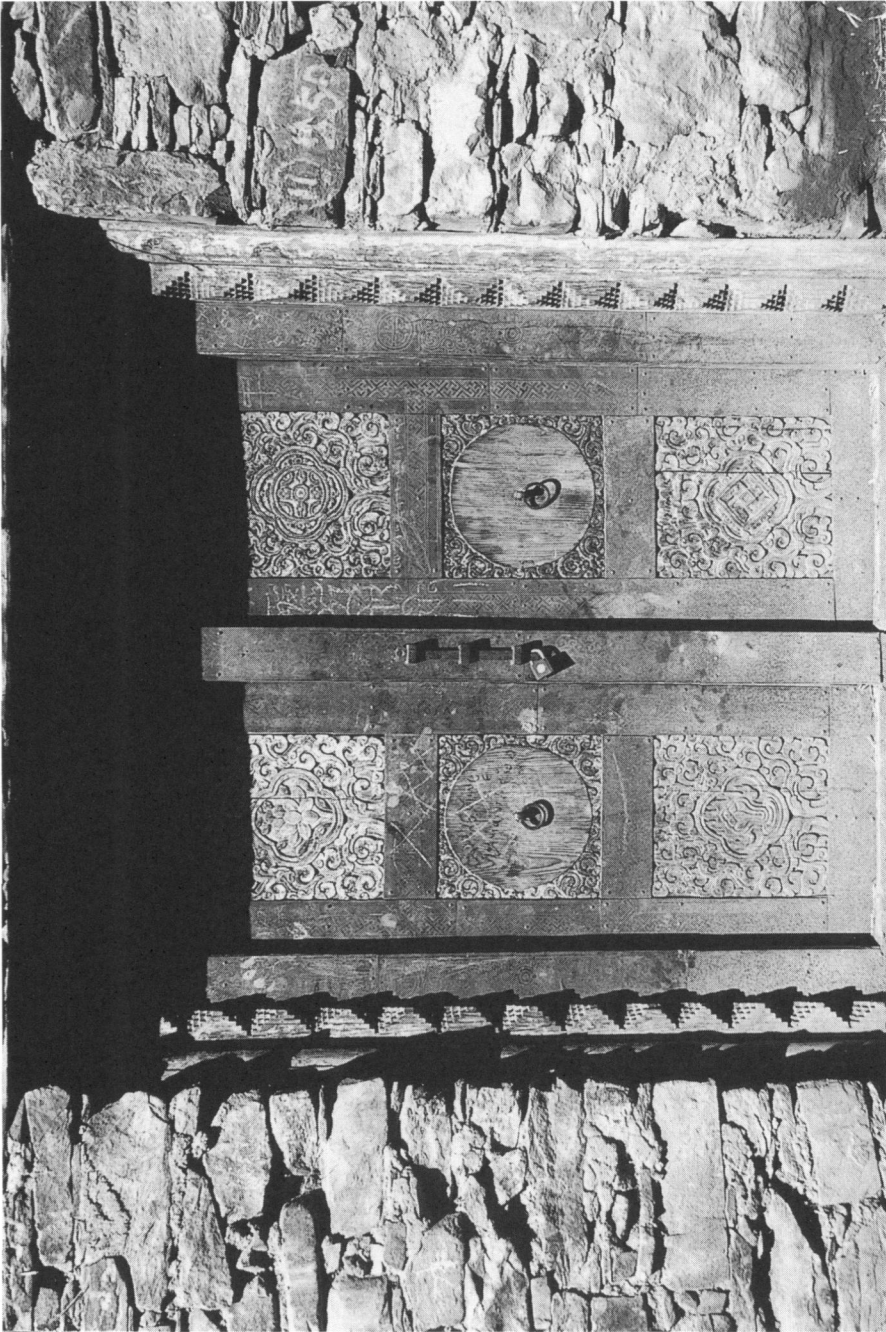
Pl. 26 Base of the Drug zur stone tower



Pl. 27 Ground where the palace of the Khro skyabs kings once stood.



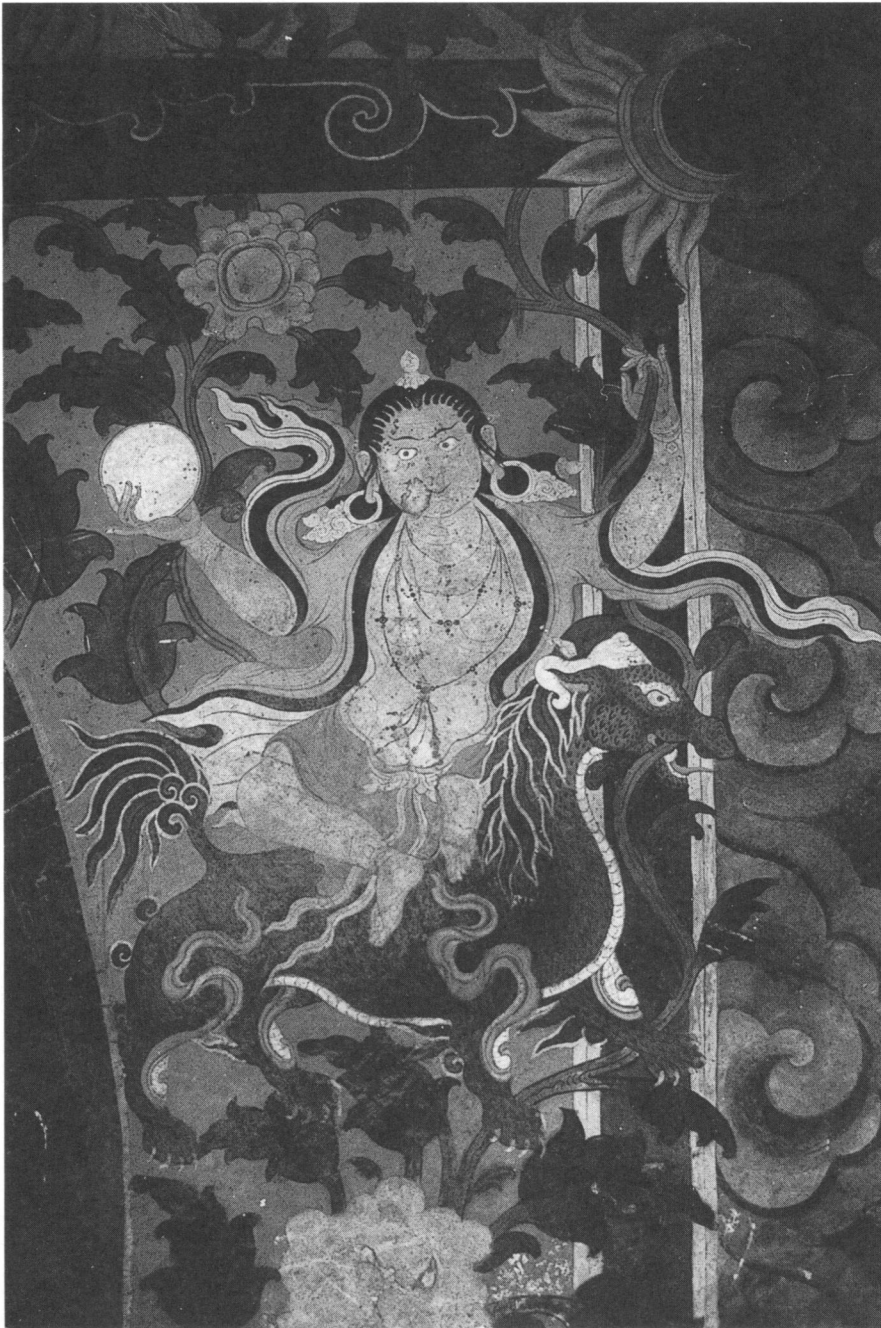
Pl. 28 b'Isun mo lha Khang, Queen's Temple



Pl. 29 Door-way of Queen's Temple



Pl. 30 Motif from the back of gShen rab's throne, mural painting in Queen's Temple, cf. A 23 [Pl. 105] and B 10 [Pl. 117]



Pl. 31 Motif from the back of gShen rab's throne, mural painting in Queen's Temple, cf. A 23 [Pl. 105] and B 10 [Pl. 117]



Pl. 32 Monks, mural paintings in Queen's Temple



Pl. 33 A divinity unidentified, mural painting in Queen's Temple



Pl. 34 A king of Khro skyabs, mural painting in Queen's Temple



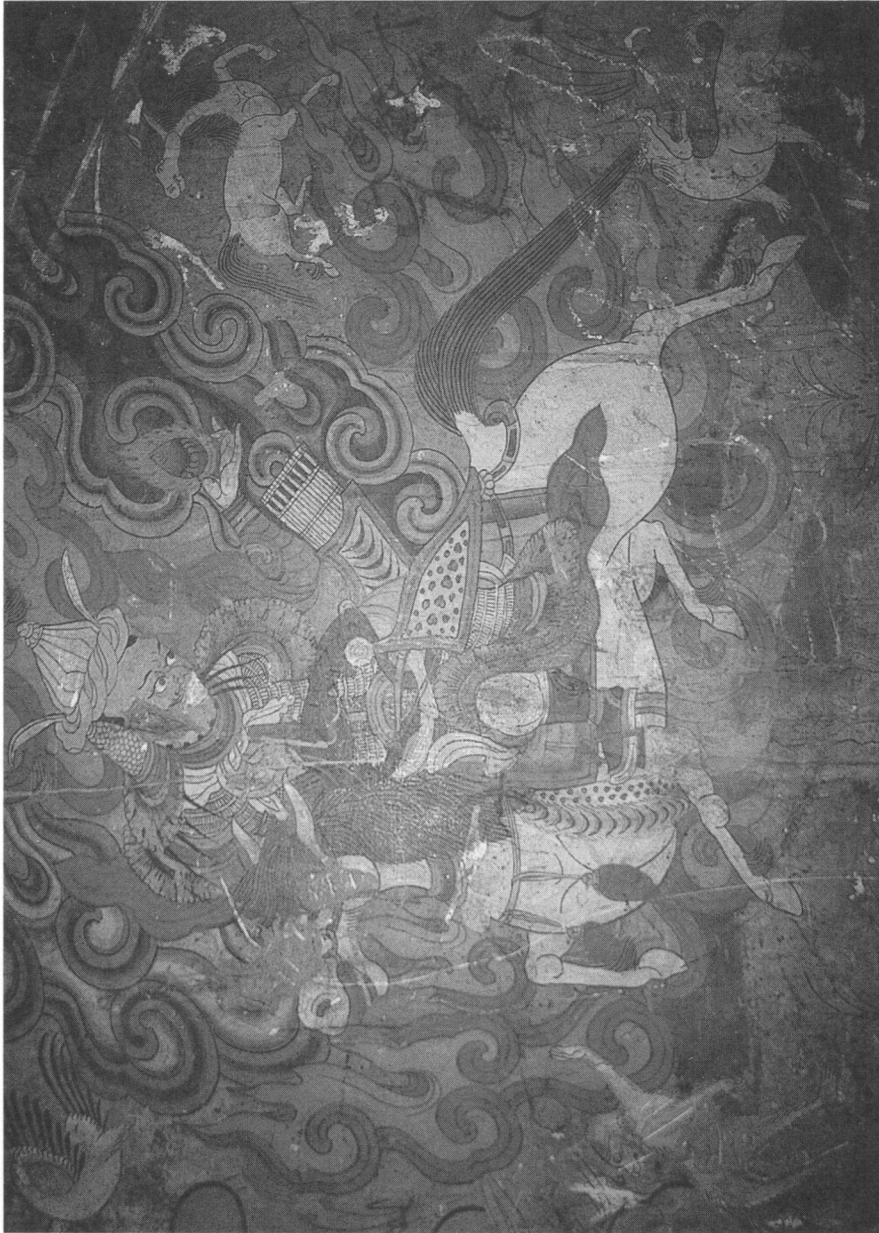
Pl. 35 A Bon practitioner, mural painting in Queen's Temple



Pl. 36 Goddess Byams ma, mural painting in Queen's Temple



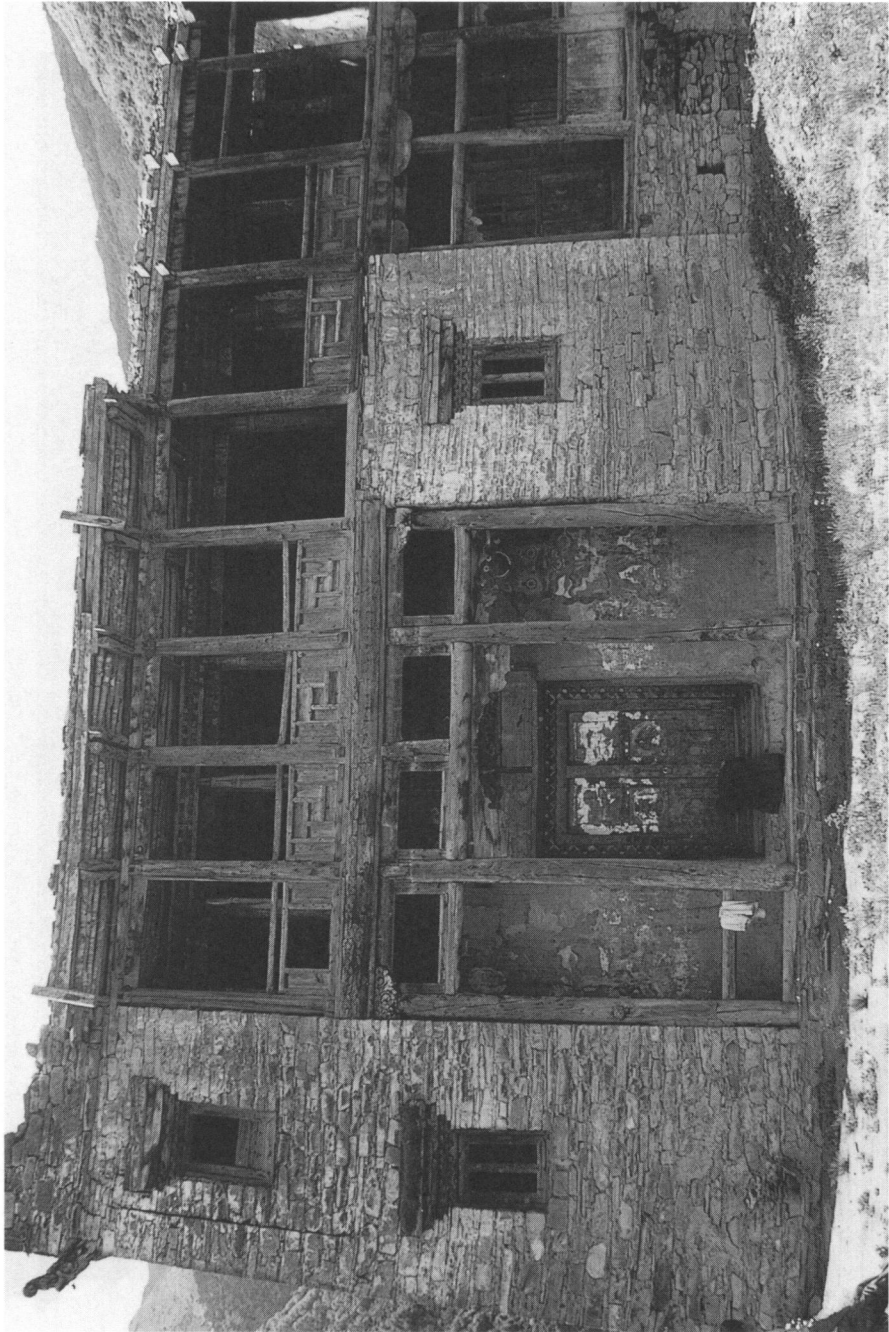
Pl. 37 Stupas, mural painting in Queen's Temple



Pl. 38 A local deity (yul lha), mural painting in Queen's Temple



Pl. 39 Deities disfigured by writings in Chinese, mural painting in Queen's Temple

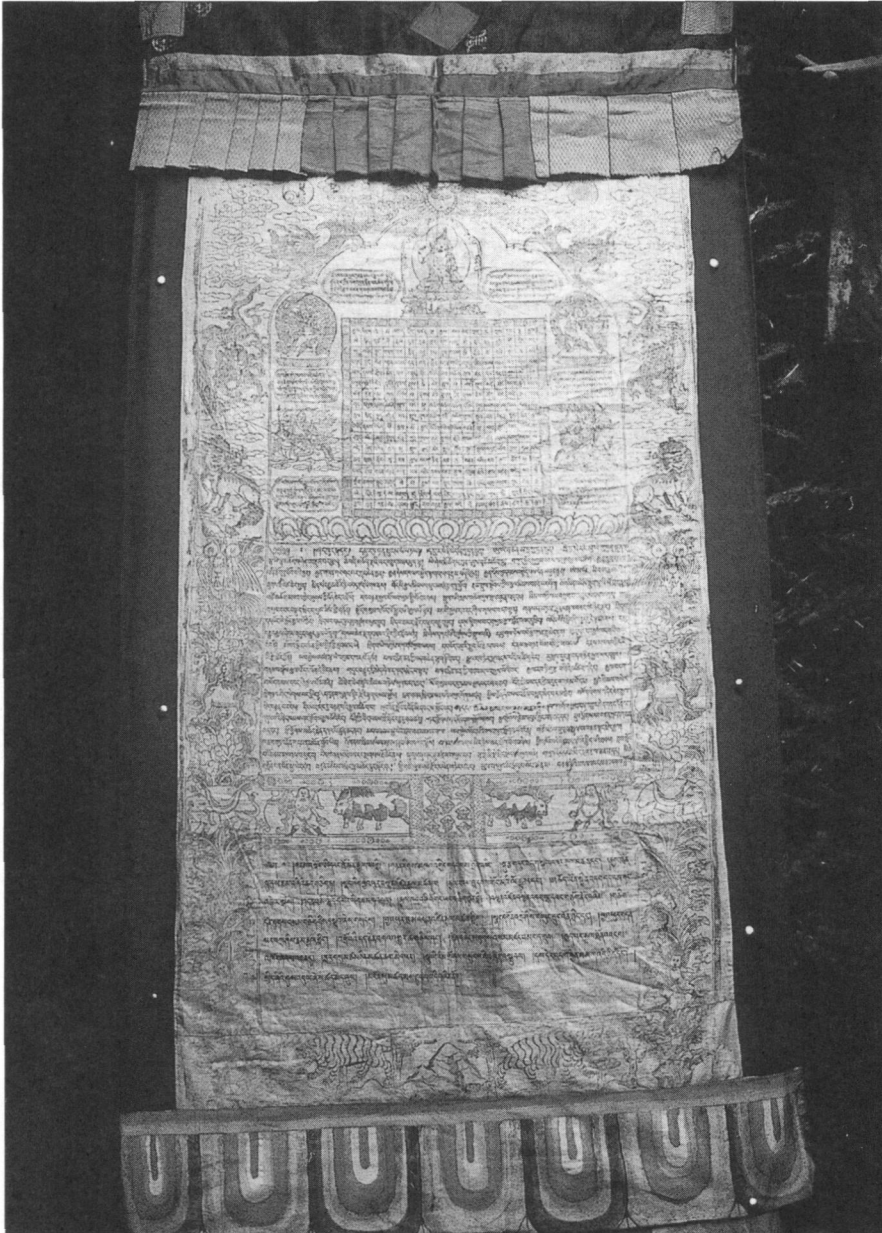


Pl. 40a Ngo mtshar nor bu gling Monastery, partially destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.



Pl. 40b Ngo mtshar nor bu gling Monastery, rebuilt in the 1990s.

(Plates 21-40a, SGK 1985; Pl. 40b Tsering Thar 1998)



Pl. 41 Edict of King bSod nams dbang rgyal, Bya 'phur, sNang zhig dgon, rNga khog, Amdo, SGK 1985