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Chapter4 Manchu military campaigns against Gyalrong

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Chapter 4 Manchu military campaigns against Gyalrong

I do not intend to go into any detail concerning the *history* of the Manchu expeditions in Gyalrong here. Several accounts of the events have already been published in Western languages, most notably by Patrick Mansier (1990) and Dai (2001). If I give a summary of these events here, it is because Chu chen was not only the most powerful principality in Gyalrong, but also one of the most staunch up-holders of the Bon faith. It was in the process of engraving woodblocks of the Bon Canon in the same period as those of Khro skyabs.

Manchu encroachment of Gyalrong began in 1746 on the excuse of settling local disputes in the bTsan la principality, but the fighting was abandoned in 1749 after strong resistance was encountered. This conflict is usually described as the first Manchu military campaign against the Gyalrong people, but there is generally little said about it in Tibetan sources. King Nam mkha' rgyal po of Chu chen presumably encouraged the resistance during the first expedition that lasted from 1746 to 1749, but as we have seen, he became a monk and his entry into monkhood had taken place after the conflict stopped in 1749. However, after a twenty-year lapse, the Manchus woke up again and began to invade the country once more. This time the war lasted for six years. This invasion is known as the second Jinchuan campaign in Manchu and Chinese sources.

The Gyalrong people in general were reputed to be aggressive and unbending. King bSod nams dbang rgyal and his people in Chu chen and those of bTsan la proved this to be the case. It is not certain whether they were supported by all other principalities in their resistance against the invaders. As seen above, the Khro skyabs principality was enjoying a good relationship with the Manchu court in the same period. According to the inscription¹ the king of Chu chen after having won the war against the Manchus, overpowered ten principalities including Khro skyabs. This suggests that the principality of Chu chen felt strong enough to command other tribes especially when it wanted to build the monastery gYung drung lha steng.

In their resistance, their geographical position aided them enormously, because Gyalrong is mainly a long and narrow valley through which flows the great river called rGyal mo dngul chu, often wrongly spelled as rGya mo rngul chu. The steep and rugged eastern mountain range of the valley is the watershed that separates the main valley in Gyalrong from the Sichuan basin. This geographical inaccessibility was a disadvantage for the Manchu army. The other factor in the successful resistance was the tall and high stone towers that were scattered about the valley. To this day many of them still can be seen [Pl. 71-72]. These towers were built mainly for defensive purposes, but also as we have seen some were considered as a symbol of prestige as was the case of the six cornered (*drug zur*) tower at the back of the palace of the Khro chen royal family in Khro skyabs.

There were other elements that were crucial for the success of the second expedition. While one was psychologically necessary perhaps, the other was material, but both components were lacking at the time of the first military campaign.

By 1746 the political interest of the Manchus over Tibet gained momentum and the dGe lugs as the supreme Buddhist clergy of Tibet therefore enjoyed special Manchu imperial favours. The dGe lugs pa clergy was shrewd enough and eager to use the occasion for their advantage, especially in areas where their church had difficulties in overcoming local religious opponents. Gyalrong was a perfect example of this since it was one of the last strongholds of the Bon religion. The preeminence enjoyed by Bon in Gyalrong among the favours of the powerful local chiefs was an eye-sore for the dGe lugs pa.

lCang skya Khutuktu Rol pa'i rdo rje (1717-1786), who was born Mongol, but brought up with Tibetan education, and a fervent dGe lugs pa reincarnate had an official function at the Manchu court as a religious advisor to the emperor Qianlong who furthermore had known him since their school days. When the Manchu army was well entrenched in its war against Gyalrong around 1772, lCang skya was asked by the emperor to perform a Buddhist rite so that the army might come through without losing too many men. In his 'biography' of lCang skya, Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737-1802) describes his master's rite as what seems to have been a most extraordinary magico-religious demonstration against the Bonpo in Gaylrong.² Although it is hard to assess claims regarding the effect of the said Buddhist ritual in bringing about military success, it must have given psychological encouragement, but the ritual took place in 1772 and the war was won only in 1776. However, the aim of the army was finally realized not so much through the Buddhist rite as the Western technology that happily came to the help of the army.

At the Manchu court, there was also a Portuguese Jesuit missionary by the name of Felix da Rocha (1713-1781) who was based in Macao. This Christian father was employed at the court to fabricate cannons for the Manchu Army. He even participated in the final Manchu assault against Chu chen that took place in 1775. Under the siege of the cannon balls, the fort called bKa' rñgom³ 'Gyur med pho brang from where King bSod nams dbang rgyal was commanding finally fell.⁴ 2000 people including the king were taken as prisoners of war to Beijing.

With the defeat of the king, his monastery gYung drung lha steng which was founded in 1766, was destroyed in 1776 and was rebuilt as a dGe lugs pa monastery in the same year. It was then called dGa' ldan according to one dGe lugs pa source⁵ and bsTan 'phel gling according to another.⁶ The latter name corresponds to the Chinese name Guangfasi. dGe lugs pa monks from 'Bras spungs, Central Tibet, were summoned to run the monastery. This new forcibly converted monastery bsTan 'phel gling in Chu chen was not only given the full authority over all other dGe lugs pa establishments in

Gyalrong by the Manchu court, but also from its first to the 13th abbots were all appointed directly by the imperial court. From the 14th abbot onwards they were appointed by the Tibetan government.⁷ The first abbot was Sangs rgyas 'od zer, a monk of the sGo mang college in 'Bras spungs. He was a man from gTsang. As abbot he was invested with the authority for appointing the heads of all other dGe lugs pa monasteries in Gyalrong. Most of his successors were appointed from the dGe lugs pa monasteries in Central Tibet.⁸ In 1795 the emperor Qianlong issued an edict in support of the monastery and in memory of Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs, the third abbot of the monastery. This abbot was originally from sPro snang in Gyalrong and was a monk of the Blo gsal gling college in 'Bras spungs.⁹

It was an abbot of this new dGe lugs pa monastery named mKhyen rab bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan who in 1874 successfully converted the old Bon monastery called 'Bar khams gYung drung gling into a dGe lugs pa one and gave it the name dGa' ldan dar rgyas gling. However, this time, the old building of the main temple was not pulled down, but its Bon mural paintings were erased in order to repaint the deities of the dGe lugs pa order.¹⁰

The bsTan 'phel gling Monastery became a powerful ecclesiastical institution as it enjoyed the Manchu imperial support. However, it was razed during the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of 1980s, the local Bonpo people reclaimed the monastery and the Sichuan government finally permitted them to rebuild it as a Bonpo monastery¹¹ [Pl.73-74].

In 1997 I had the occasion of visiting it. It is situated on the east bank of the river rGyal mo dngul chu. I reached it from Brag mgo rdzong taking the road along the river on the west bank and traveling towards north. After a few kilometers, one had to leave the vehicle and cross a narrow foot-bridge. Once on the other side, a footpath leads to the monastery along the river going down southwards. The monastery was situated on a small flat piece of ground at the foot of a mountain and by the river side with fields growing maize. The reconstruction of the main temple was not yet complete. It looked rather too large to me, but it may have followed the original size. It was totally empty, but after a while, some people began to gather together and then an old monk also appeared. He was the caretaker [Pl. 75], but being deaf no communication was possible with him. However, he showed me what looked like a stele. It was on the ground and covered with mud as it was used for a stepping stone below the thresh hold of the door at the eastern entrance of the temple. The writings inscribed have been entirely effaced [Pl. 76]. Tibetan sources suggest that the emperor Qianlong also issued a decree prohibiting the practice of the Bon religion in the area after the defeat of the local people and this decree is said to have been inscribed on a stele. I presumed that it might be the imperial edict of the Tibetan sources. This stele is probably the one seen by Albert Tafele and later a rubbing was made by Erich Haenisch.¹²

The monk also showed me another inscription. It was at the foot of the wall in the vestibule of the temple lying on the ground and supported by two pieces of wood. The wall in the question was on the right hand side as one enters the temple through its main doors. I was told that it was originally down in the field to the south of the temple. It is somewhat more than two meters long and about 50 cm wide and 40 cm thick. The stele has a long inscription in Tibetan densely incised in relief with smallish characters. There are seventy-two lines. The peculiar character of this stele is that the letters are not incised into the rock like the early Tibetan inscriptions of the eighth and ninth centuries, but they are carved in relief in three dimensions. On the other face, it has two parallel sections, in the left hand section it has Tibetan and in the other Chinese.

It was this stele that our colleague Per Kvaerne discovered in 1988 when he made a visit to the site. The stele then stood in a field to the south of the temple [Pl. 77]. Per Kvaerne with Elliot Sperling have made a translation of the texts in Tibetan and Chinese and published it 1993, but not the long text in Tibetan of the other face of the same stele, because it was practically illegible and moreover "it was upside-down; the whole stele having obviously been overturned, what was originally the back of the stele was used for the new inscription of 1795..."¹³

The fact that the stele already had a long text in Tibetan did not mean much to the Manchu officials and their dGe lugs pa collaborators who used the back of the old stele, erecting it in such a way that the old inscription would stand upside-down, its top part buried in the ground. The only reason for this astonishing disrespect on the part of the Tibetans who were dGe lugs pa is that the old inscription was concerned with the king Nam mkha' rgyal po of Chu chen and his Bon monastery gYung drung lha steng.¹⁴ To be precise, the new inscription was issued as an edict for "confirming imperial support for the monastery and for Dge-lugs-pa politico-religious domination in Rgyal-rong".¹⁵ The two scholars rightly suggest that the study of the long text of the other face of the stele would produce a different story. Indeed it is about the king Nam mkha' rgyal po of Rab brtan royal house who had founded the monastery gYung drung lha steng in 1766. It is dedicated to the memory of the king who first took the vows of *dge bsyen* in the presence of Kun grol and later was ordained as a monk by the abbot of the monastery.

¹ For a partial translation of this inscription, see Chapter 5.

² For an English translation of Thu'u bkwan's account, see Martin 1987: 8-13.

³ Chinese transcription of this name is given as Karyan (Mansier 1990: 129).

⁴ Martin: 1987: 17.

⁵ BG p. 389.

⁶ DCh p. 777.

⁷ Ibid., p. 777.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 777.

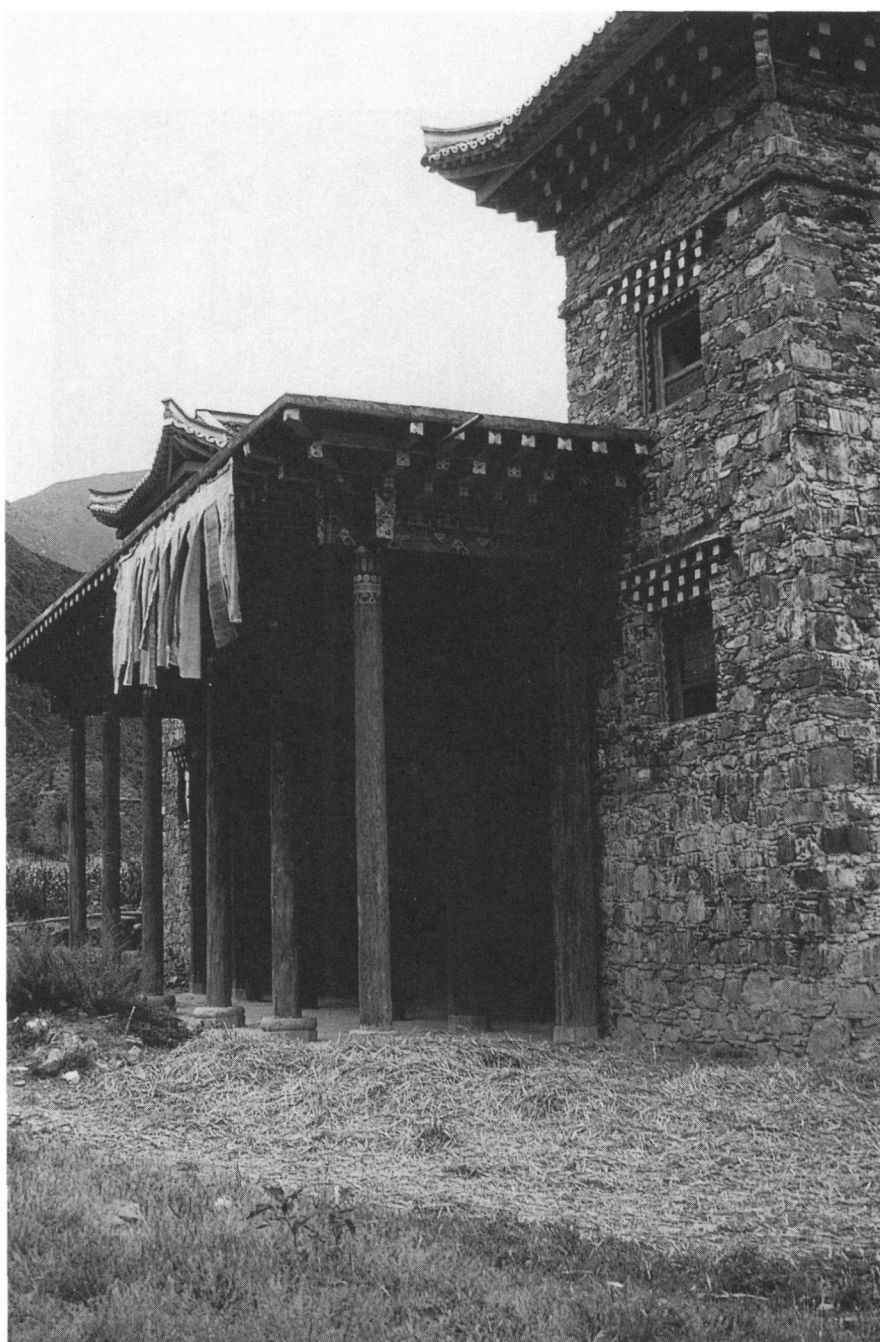
- ⁹ Cf. Kvaerne, Sperling 1993: 115.
- ¹⁰ Sher grags, *Bar khams zhes pa'i ming gi byung tshul*, p.149 (in *rNga ba bod rigs rang skyong khul gyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad yig gdams bsgrigs*, Deb gsum pa, 1986, 148-151).
- ¹¹ Survey No. 187.
- ¹² Kvaerne, Sperling 1993: 123.
- ¹³ Kvaerne, Sperling 1993: 122-23.
- ¹⁴ For the stele see Chapter 5, Pl. 78.
- ¹⁵ Kvaerne, Sperling 1993: 119.



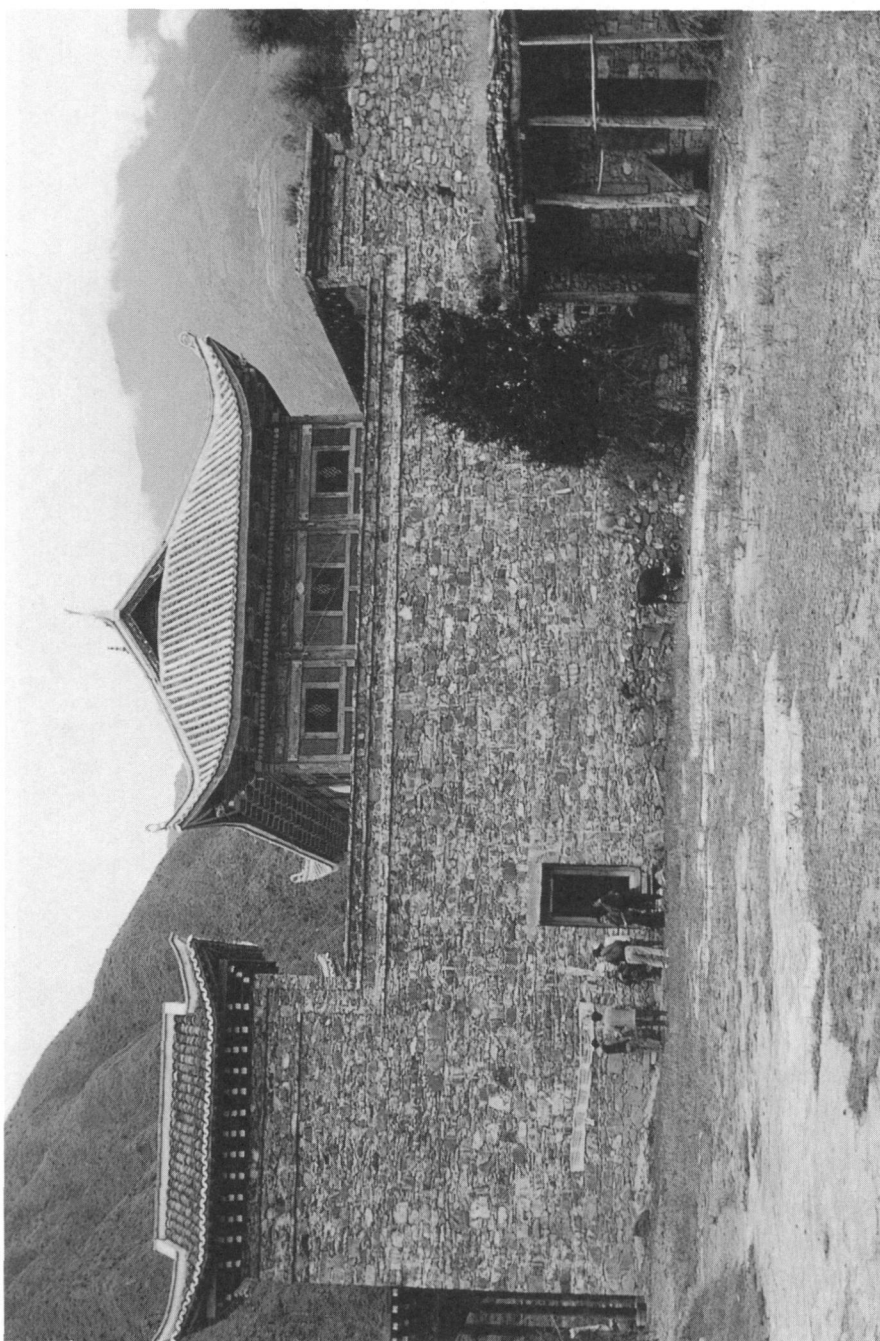
Pl. 71 12 stone towers, Rongdrag (Danba), SGK 1997



Pl. 72 A village with its two towers, Khro skyabs, SGK 1985



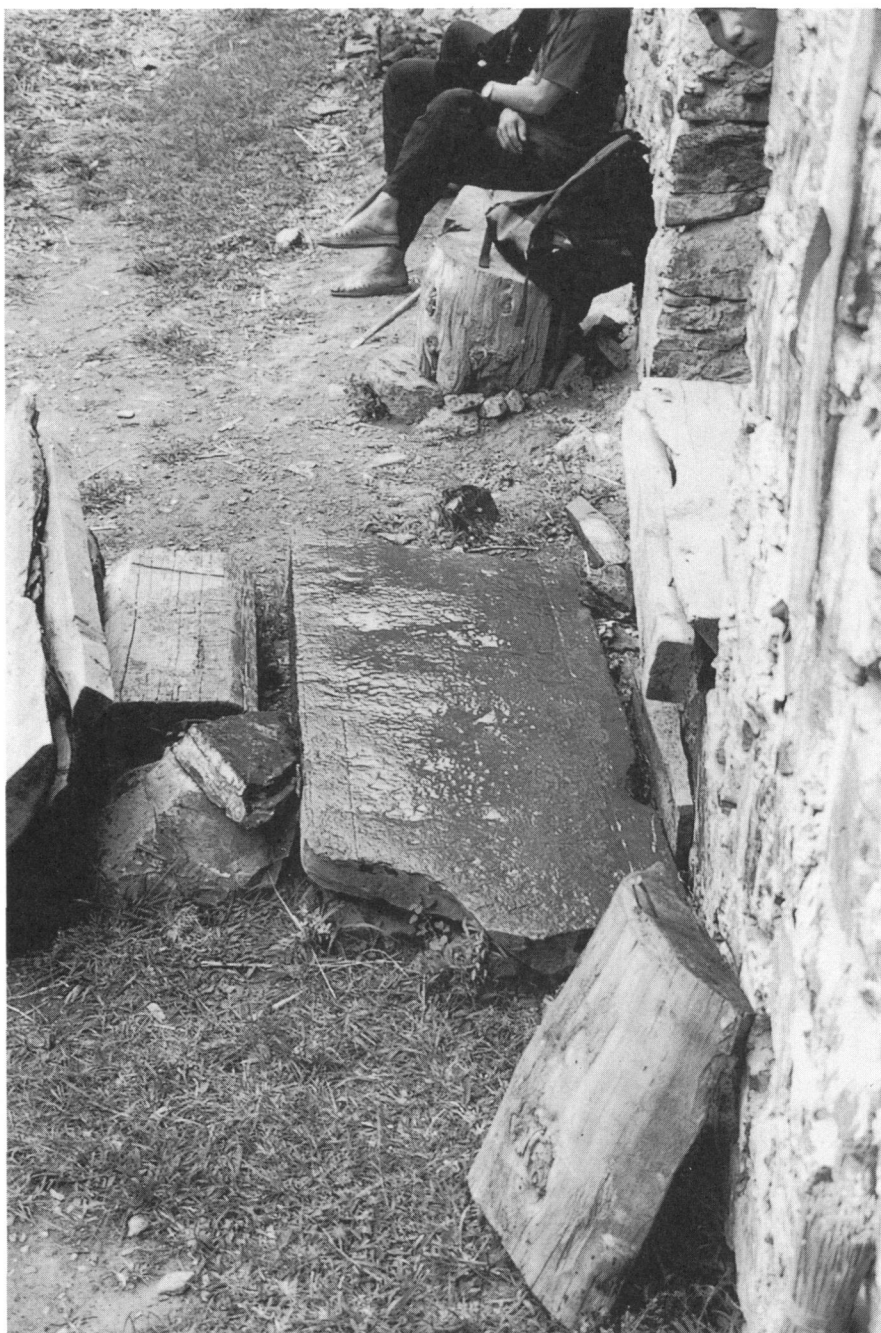
Pl. 73 gYung drung lha steng Monastery, rebuilt, Chu chen, SGK 1997



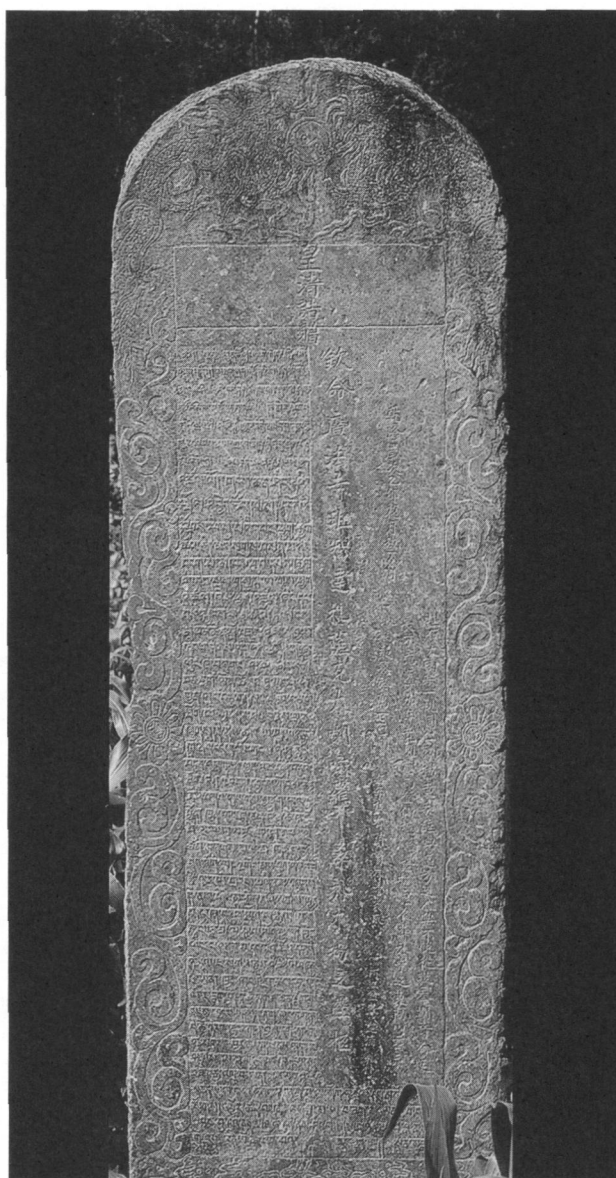
Pl. 74 Eastern façade of gYung drung lha steng Monastery, SGK 1997



Pl. 75 The caretaker of gYung drung lha steng Monastery, SGK 1997



Pl. 76 A damaged stele, SGK 1997



Pl. 77 The stele, P. Kvaerne 1988