The transferred sacral geography of Mt Meru (Kailash)

Bettina Zeisler, Tübingen – Leh, Lata
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I. The high division (or lord, yabgu) of the country’s rivers

Or

The main watershed
In Old Tibetan documents, we find the designation ‘The high divide(r) (or lord, yabgu) of the country’s rivers’ for the country of Zhangzhung, which is roughly equal to ‘The main watershed’. This is, because three great rivers take their origin in the vicinity of Mt Kailash.
These are: the Brahmaputra in the east, the Satlej in the southwest, and the Indus in the north. Since all of them take their origin at or near Mt. Kailash, the latter might be called the ‘water divider’ or watershed, hence the Old Tibetan expression.
In Buddhist texts, however, one can read about a four-river template. That is, the Karnali is added as a fourth river and counted as the Gaṅgā. But the real source of the Gaṅgā is to be found much further west.
Furthermore, the four rivers and the associated animals are given quite differently in different texts. For example, the peacock might be located in the north and the Gangā might be found in the west or in the east. One can actually get quite confused!
The reason is, that Mt Meru and the rivers had been originally located at quite a different place. Only later did they get translocated from the original place to present-day Mṇaḥris or Guge.
II. The ‘Roof of the World’

Zhangzhung of Persia
How can I say this? Well, in some pre-Sroṅbrtsan Sgampo non-Tibetan Buddhist documents, such as the report of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (ca. 640), one finds the following scheme (most probably from the Abhidharmakoṣa):
North: Sitā (Tarim) Lion
West: Pakṣu (Oxus) Horse
East: Gaṅgā Bull
South: Sindhu (Gilgit-Indus) Elephant
But there are again inconsistencies: How can the source of the Sitā or Tarim be directly north of the Kailash? And how can the source of the Gāṅgā be east of the Kailash?
North: Sitā (Tarim) Lion

West: Pakṣu (Oxus) Horse

East: Gaṅgā Bull

South: Sindhu (Gilgit-Indus) Elephant
It is quite apparent that the Gaṅgā does not flow east of the Kailash, its real sources are west to it. Even the Karnali would not flow in its east, but in its south. The centre of the four rivers would lie somewhere in La-dakh, not too far from Leh. Could it be Stok Glacier?
There is no evidence, however, that Mt Meru/ Kailash was ever located near Leh. Thus, the two rivers of the north and east must have been known differently in earlier times.

If one looks at a map, one can see that the Pamirs form a kind of X, the so called ‘Pamir knot’.
The northeastern arm is formed by the Tienshan range, the southeastern branches are formed by the Kunlun and the Karakoram-Himalayan ranges, the southwestern arm is formed by the Hindukūsh, and the western and northwestern branches are formed by the Alay mountains and other smaller chains.
Between these arms flow four great rivers in approximately the four cardinal directions: the Tarim (Sitā) in the east, the Sindhu (the source of which was earlier thought to be in Gilgit) in the south, the Oxus (Amu Darya) in the west, the Jaxartes (Sir Darya) in the north. Each river flows into a different sea or salt lake.
The Oxus used to flow into the Caspian Sea through a course known as Uzboy. Only part of the water reached the Aral Sea. Somewhat before the left arm turns of from the present course, there is a narrow gorge, known earlier in Arabic sources also as the ‘Gate of the Lion’s Mouth’.
Gate of the Lion’s Mouth

Uzboy
The Tarim actually ends up in the Lop Nor, but in early times, people had thought that from this salt lake, the river would flow underground, below the Kunlun mountains and would reappear as the Yellow River and thus end up in the Chinese eastern ocean.
In any case, the original template covered much of the Aryan, that is Indo-Iranian speaking, world, and except for the Indian section it represented the Iranian world. The template might have been invented by the Iranian elites to illustrate their claim to ‘universal’ rulership.
At some time, however, the Gaṅgā became very precious for the Indians and they conceptualised her in the place of the Tarim, while the Tarim was conceptualised in the place of the Jaxartes.
III: The centre of the world

Zhangzhung of Tibet
And this lead to a gradual relocation of Meru towards the east and then to an adaptation to the geographical situation further east, that is, to a replacement of the rivers. Confusion arose, as one tried to keep the old river names, but at the same time tried to match these names with those of the rivers of the new template.
North: Sitā (Tarim) Lion

West: Pakṣu (Oxus) Horse

East: Gaṅgā Bull

South: Sindhu (Gilgit-Indus) Elephant
Same rivers, but the wrong animals (*Mdoḥdus*)

Lion > Peacock

Horse > Bull > Elephant

Elephant > Bull
Changing rivers I (Rgyalrabs Bongyi ḥbyunggnas):

Oxus

Yellow River  Naradzana (?)

Siti-Situ (Tarim? Sindhu? Gaṅgā?)
Gyimšan or Kyimšan represents Chinese Jincheng, a place near Lanzhou. It is the place up to which the second Chinese princess to be married to a Tibetan emperor was escorted, and her Tibetan name was derived from this place. The upper course of the Yellow River passes Lanzhou.
Changing rivers II (Karmay 1998a: 105):

- Oxus Lion
- Gangā Elephant
- Yellow River Horse
- Naradza (?) Peacock
Changing rivers III (Tise gnasbšad):

Tarim Lion

Gangā Elephant

Oxus Horse

Sindhu Bull
This is just the mirror image of the Indian scheme, and it seems that it is based on a drawing for a block print, where either the person drawing or the wood cutter had forgotten that when printing, the right and the left side would be inverted.
The author of the *Tise gnasbšad* is aware of the mismatch, but tries to explain this by the assumption that all rivers start in the opposite direction, but turn round below lake Anavatapta /Manasarowar which would then push the Sitā/Tarim to the south!
मक्खिमार्गिया/मक्खिमार्गा

Anavatatpata/Manasarowar

Tarim  Sindhu

Oxus  Gaṅgā
The image contains a diagram with the following key points:

- **Anavatapta/Manasarowar** is located at the center.
- **Tarim**, **Sindhu**, **Oxus**, and **Gangā** are connected to Anavatapta/Manasarowar.
- The connections are indicated with arrows and dashed lines.
- The text in the image is not legible or recognizable from the image provided.
There is even an explanation for a southern Sitā: the Gangā has been associated with the Sitā either directly or indirectly. In the latter case, the Gangā is thought to branch off into the four major rivers, with Sitā being the eastern-most of them. Needless to say, that even this concept has been replaced by a concept where the Gangā branches into five (!) more regional rivers.
Changing rivers IV (Bod-Rgya tshigmdzod chenmo!):

Indus Lion

Gaṅgā Elephant  Brahmaputra = Oxus Horse
(flowing through Mṇaḥris = Satlej)

River of Purang or Gaṅgā headwaters Peacock
Changing rivers V \textit{(Bod-Rgya English version)}:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Tarim Lion
  \item Brahmaputra = Oxus Horse
  \item Gaṅgā Elephant
  \item Sindhu Peacock
\end{itemize}
IV. The wandering mountain
While the rivers keep changing like a whirling svastika, Mt Meru alias Kailāśa left some traces of its journey to the east:
A Kailash range “lies north-east of Gilgit, south of Hunza, east of Punial, the highest peak of which is said to be Dumani or Rakaposhi” (Dani 1991: 106). Some Balti scholars at the IALS seminar in Kargil 2005 mentioned a Mt Kailash near Skardo, which may be the Mustagh pass north of Skardo.
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In close vicinity to the Tibetan Kailash, there are at least two more mountains in Himachal Pradesh which bear the name Kailash. One is in Kinnaur, and the Kinnauris would claim that, of course, their Kailash is the only true one (Anju Saxena, p.c.).
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Chinese sources have shifted Mt Meru from the western end of the Kunlun, the Pamirs, to its eastern end (and along with the mountain, the geographical template of the Pamirs and the Hindukūsh, e.g. Gandhāra is relocated in Yunnan, Zahor in Bengal, Kāmarūpa in Assam, etc.).
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Finally, a Kelasa is also found in Burma/Myanmar. I do not want to preclude that there is also one more Kailash or Meru somewhere in Indonesia or wherever Hinduism or Buddhism reached. (One might even expect, in 100 years or so a new Kailash/Meru somewhere in the U.S.)
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V. Conclusion
Even if the rivers are sorted out correctly, the Tibetan four-river system is much less impressive than the Pamirian model:
The four rivers do not flow in the cardinal directions and they do not reach four separate oceans (or salt lakes). Satlej and Indus both flow roughly westwards and unite halfway, while Brahmaputra and Gaṅgā both flow eastwards and eventually unite their deltas. So then, which one will be the original model?
Even if you don’t believe it