From a modern western perspective, historical accounts are nothing but narrations or mere constructions, often serving political aims, such as rendering one’s own country and ruler more glorious and rendering other countries and their rulers less important. Histories may be (re-)written in order to legitimise a ruler or even usurper. For instance, many rulers of Purīk claimed to be descendants of the Spurgyalli dynasty of the Tibetan Empire. Similarly, some Kuśāna rulers in India, an 8th century ruler in Gandhāra, as well as some 10th to 11th century Turkish rulers in Central Asia pretended to be related to the Roman Emperors by bearing the name Kesaro or also Gesar, derived from the first Roman emperor Caesar. (In Germany the Emperors called themselves Kaiser, in Russia Czar.) The ruler of Gya-Miru, likewise claimed to be a Caesar. Assuming such a big name helps in getting accepted as a ruler, particularly if the majority of the people believes in the name. Similarly, some people quite proudly claimed to be from the same tribe as the Spurgyal, assuming the name Spuryalli rigs or Spuryalli rānḷ, the contracted forms of which became Puran and Spurig. Further to the east, in Western Tibet, the initial s- prefix (as well as the final -s suffix) got dropped, so that both names would be realised as Puran and Purig. Therefore it seems to be quite likely that the name Purig had been borrowed from further east.

For such reasons, it is of uttermost importance to reexamine all historical traditions very carefully. One has to read between the lines and deconstruct the political aims and the ideological bias behind the particular statements. Whatever cannot be corroborated by independent witnesses or circumstances must be treated as being doubtful. Only what is corroborated by independent witnesses can be used as elements to reconstruct a history that comes closer to the reality.

### 1. Witnesses for the early history

A great problem of early Tibetan history, that is, the time before Sronbrtsan Sampo, and even more so of early Ladakhi history, that is the time before the conquest by the Tibetan Empire somewhat later, is the almost total lack of historical sources. Even the Old Tibetan sources have few, if not nothing to say about Ladakh, and only very little about Žaṅžuṅ, of which Upper Ladakh may have been a part. Adding to this problem is the lack of defini-
2.1 Men of No Where (MON)

Local traditions in Upper Ladakh and Western Tibet often describe the Lamas as the earliest inhabitants. This is not based on solid facts. The inferior status of the Lamas has been enshrined in tradition, and has been passed on from generation to generation. Further, Lamas have been considered to be the lowest in the social hierarchy, and have been the object of scorn and contempt. The whole scenario merely reflects the European colonial thinking, but the primary source of information in this respect are the rocks of the Middle Ages, which have been preserved in the historical annals of the Middle Ages. The following are the main sources:

1. The 7th century Kasmirian Rājata (collected by Hsiian-tsang) is a very late retrospective source. It has nothing to say about the early history of Ladakh or Baltistan, and is probably rather unreliable. This source is mentioned in the historical annals of Ladakh, but it is not known how accurate they are.

The sources are contempraneous accounts from the Chilung period, the Lower Han, and the Tang dynasty, where we find also some more information. There are two main sources for the early history of Ladakh. The first is Xuanzang's account, which has been preserved in the historical annals of China. The second is the account of the Buddhist monk, Hiuen-Tsang, who visited Ladakh in the 8th century CE. These writings, gathered from the Tang writings, are still valid and have been preserved in the historical annals of China. The most reliable sources are contemporaneous accounts from the Chilung period.

2. Who were the early inhabitants?

Finally, there are some archaeological remains mainly in Western Tibet (Minyur) during the Late Bronze Age and the Communities Era. Similarly some rock art and architectural remains in Western Tibet can be roughly dated to the 4th century BCE or later.
plied by Tibetans to Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, as well as Indo-Euro-
pean tribes or people. In the Western Tibetan and Ladakhi context of an-
cient buildings it does not mean more than ‘it wasn’t us or our ancestors,
who built these castles, and we have no idea who did it’. I would thus pre-
fer to read the name merely as acronym. Besides the enigmatic Mon, Kesar
or the gods may be named as builders.

2.2 Tibetans
As a word of Tibetan origin, the name Mon could have been applied only
after the Tibetans settled in Ladakh. However, by all that we know from
the Tibetan historical accounts, is that the ‘kingdom’ of Žažun, either
comprising Upper Ladakh or lying in between Tibet and Upper Ladakh
was overthrown and conquered by Srongbtsan Sampo in the middle of the
7th century. Only then (or perhaps even much later) did the process of
Tibetanisation, including the immigration of Tibetans begin. The Ladvags
Rgyalras mentions some earlier incursions by the Tibetans into the west,
but these seem to have been merely raids, not affecting the ethnic composi-
tion of the country. The Korean pilgrim Hyecho, who passed through
Chilas and Gilgit (Greater and Lesser Bolor) around 730 CE, speaks of
Ladakh-Žažun (Yangtong) as being populated by the same people as
Bolor, namely by Hu, Central Asian people in general, or more specifically
Iranians, clearly different from the Tibetans further east. The Rājaratanginī
and a passage in the Hṛṣācarita give further evidence that during the 6th to
7th century Ladakh and Western Tibet were under the sway of a Hephthal-
ite/Hūṇa tribal branch, which will be discussed further below.
Francke’s assumption was solely based on an invalid linguistic argument.
Unfortunately, there is no time to demonstrate this in detail.
2.3 The Dards – and the source of the Indus

The Shina-speaking Minaro or Brokpa of Ladakh and Baltistan are part of a larger cultural complex formerly spreading throughout most of the Hindu Kush, Karakorum and parts of the Pamirs. Most probably several genetically and linguistically different peoples or tribes shared this culture, among others also the people from Hunza and Nagar (Bruža). A (or the) greater part of these peoples must have been speaking an Indo-European language, more precisely, an Indo-Aryan language of the so-called Dardic group. Most traces of this earlier culture have been effaced by Islam, on the one hand, and Buddhism, on the other.

The designations Dard and Dardic are borrowed from an ancient Sanskrit term Darada, used for tribes settling in approximately the same area as the present day speakers of the Dardic languages, among which we may count, among others, Kashmiri, Kohistani, and Shina. Some early Sanskrit sources as well as the 3rd century CE Greek geographer Ptolemy have described the Darada as sitting at the upper course of the Indus river or even near its source. Given our present (or 18th century) geographical knowledge, it was taken for granted that the Darada were sitting in Western Tibet or at least all over Ladakh, while nobody seems to have paid attention to the fact that the region widely known as Upper Indus Valley lies – in present-day Pakistan. The reason for this apparent misnomer is that the ancient people and their geographers either were not aware of the true upper part of the Indus or took it to be a marginal confluence of the Indus, the source of which they located in Gilgit (a relatively late Arab geography, the 10th century Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam even took the Kabul river as the main source). And likewise the British did not recognise the true source until late in the 18th century.

In their oral traditions, the Minaro still recount how they arrived in various places of Ladakh. However the fact that they still remember their immigration indicates that it cannot have happened more than a few centuries ago. Some details, like the spotting of a walnut tree on the other river side in the account of the foundation of Khaltase, indicate that the Minaro came into a previously inhabited and cultivated area, even if this might have been largely devastated and depopulated at that moment. More explicitly, the genealogies of some Purik chieftdoms indicate that the Minaro and related tribes were late immigrants, settling in Ladakh around or after the 15th century.

Some of the specific Dardic traits of the Ladakhi culture, particularly the Losar rite of Bhagatham, are so widespread (at least up to Hemis) and at the same time so blurred – as compared to what has been described for more western areas: they must have once included a human sacrifice – that they can hardly result from this late immigration wave, that led people mainly to Lower Ladakh and Purik. Thus we are led to conclude that peo-
people belonging to the above mentioned cultural complex settled in parts of Ladakh at some earlier time, and some undatable rock art in Western Tibet indicates that they were, if not settling, roaming and hunting even further in the East. What we do not know, however, is since when these people had been settling in Ladakh, but it is reasonable to assume that they were part of Ladakh’s population before the Tibetan conquest. That some Indoaryan people had been among the earlier settlers, before the Tibetan conquest, is corroborated by Indoaryan place names, such as Hemis and Hembaps (related to the Sanskrit word for ‘snow’) or Šaya (Shay; possibly referring to a camp ground).

2.4 Bhauṭa and Hephthalites (White Huns, Hūṇa)

The Rājatarāṅgini mentions the Bhauṭa besides the Darada as frequent intruders of Kashmir. M.A Stein and other translators took the name to be equivalent with that of the Tibetans, but thought of the inhabitants of Baltistan and Ladakh. However, while the Tibetan name Bod could be a derivation of an original Bhauṭa, the opposite is impossible, hence the name must have originally referred to a non-Tibetan people of the Himalayas and the Karakorum. The Bhauṭa are first mentioned cursorily at the time of Mihrakula, the Hephthalite or Hūṇa conquerer of Kashmir and Northern India, that is in the first half of the 6th century. The Bhauṭa are mentioned again, together with the Darada, about 200 years later as victims of Lalitādiya-Muktāpida’s raids or conquests. This Kashmirian ruler is said to first have conquered all of northern India before conquering much of Central Asia. The account of these conquests appears to be quite exaggerated and schematic: the countries are enumerated in a strict geographical order. From this ordering however it follows that the Bhauṭa should have been located west of the Darada whom he conquered immediately afterwards on a route towards the east.

About the Bhauṭa we do not hear much more than that they have extremely white skin, and, from a possibly later interpolated gloss it is indi-
directly revealed that they might have practised polyandry. The latter custom
is not very specific for the Ladakhis, it was common among the Dards and
many other Himalayan or Central Asian people, among others also among
the Hephthalites, whose women were reknowned for their headdresses with as
many horns fixed as they had husbands. An extremely white skin, espe-
cially in comparison with the not very dark Kashmiris, does not seem to fit
the present complexion of Baltis, Ladakhis or Tibetans. The Hephthalites
or White Huns, on the other hand, got their name exactly because of their
extremely fair skin. There is one single literary reference from the 7th cen-
tury Harṣacarita that the Hūṇa, as the Hephthalites or a related group were
called in India, were sitting right at the foot of the Kailash, which is some-
what surprising, since after their defeat by the combined forces of the Sas-
samians and Western Turks in 577, their remnants are said to have settled in
Afghanistan. But as far as the present Kailash is concerned, there is a cer-
tain possibility that it got its name only relatively late when the concept of
the world mountain as the source of the 4 rivers was transferred from the
Pamirs to Western Tibet. Furthermore, by the 11th century, thus even be-
fore the Rājatarāṅgīṇī was composed, Indian and Kashmirian authors were
obsessed by skin colours, and unlike today, they conceived of white skin,
as typical for the Afghan rulers of Turkic descent, as being unnatural or
even a sign of maliciousness:

“it was almost as if the colour black had shunned him in fear of being
stained by his bad reputation … so ghastly white he was, […] whiter
than the snow of the Himalayan region where he was born.”

Given the association of white skin with the Turkic people, and the remain-
ing insecurity about the location of the Kailash during the Harṣa’s reign,
the equation of the Bhauṭa with the Hephthalites and the location of the
Hephthalites in Western Tibet remains somewhat problematic. But, it also
remains unclear whether the entries concerning the Bhauṭa really refer to
Ladakh or at least Baltistan. If not, the Bhauṭa might well have been iden-
tical with the Hephthalites or a subbranch of them, both of them, however,
to be sought further west in present-day Afghanistan.

If the term Bhauṭa, despite its original reference to some other people,
was, indeed, intended to refer to the Tibetans, the apparent transfer
would give us some information about the ethnic composition of the troops, if not
of early Tibet itself. It is quite likely, that the troops in the western areas
consisted mainly of soldiers from Žaṅžuṅ (including, most probably, Upper
Ladakh). In that case, we could conclude that the population of Žaṅžuṅ
(and Upper Ladakh), at that period, looked very much like Turkic or other
fair-skinned Central Asian people, which would be as much as to say that
they were not Tibeto-Burmans, but of Central Asian or Turkic stock. This
would hold even more so for the Baltis further west.
2.5 The ‘Goldrace’ and the ‘Women’s Dominion’

According to various Chinese sources, e.g. the description by the pilgrim Xuanzang, who travelled to India in the mid 7th century, and the Korian pilgrim Hyecho who travelled around 730, Upper Ladakh was known by at least three different names: Lesser Yangtong (i.e. Western žaŋžuŋ), Suvarṇagotra (land of the ‘Goldrace’), and Nüguo/Strīrājya (‘Women’s Dominion’). That all three names referred to the same entity and not to several adjoining smaller entities becomes clear from the explicit identification between Suvarṇagotra and Nüguo by Xuanzang, on the one hand, and by identical coordinates for Lesser Yangtong and Suvarṇagotra, namely 2,700 to 3,000 li (i.e. ca. 870 to 1,000 km) south of Khargalik or Khotan, on the other hand. This would lead us quite exactly up to Leh. Additionally, what appears to be contradictory statements, namely that certain references to both Nüguo and Greater Yangtong have to be located in far Eastern Tibet, shows that the Chinese authors were dealing with the same geographically and politically not very well definable entity, that apparently stretched from Ladakh through the Changthang to Eastern Tibet. Although Baltistan and possibly also Lower Ladakh might have been part of the kingdom of Lesser Bolor or Gilgit, the descriptions for Suvarṇagotra and Nüguo, would lead us to the conclusion that these entities also extended through Baltistan and Gilgit (this would follow from an alternative description as lying south of the Pamirs), possibly even down to the Swät valley, which was likewise notorious for its independent women, also known as dākīnī or mkhahlgroma.

A Strīrājya is mentioned in the Rājatarāṅgini, as one of the countries conquered by Lalitāditya-Muktāpida. He is said to have erected a Shiva statue there, which would perhaps better fit the Swät valley than Ladakh. An additional source, not mentioned in the beginning, the Vimala-prabhāparicchā or Drinamedpalpöökyis Ṣupa, a Khotanese post festum prophecy, written in Tibetan, indicates that the land of the Goldclan is politically closely tied to Khotan, on the one hand, and to the principality of Skarro, on the other. Again we face the problem that this Skarro does not necessarily need to be identical with present day Skardo, but independent of this question, the most likely location for the land of the Goldrace would be the area of Hunza. If I were to summarise the very confused story in one line, I would say that the king of Skarro is supposed to procure gold from the land of the Goldrace, in order to defend Khotan against the Tibetans, and to unite the three provinces under his rule. The alternative interpretation, as suggested by Philip Denwood, of identify the land of the Goldrace with Ladakh and/or Nubra, faces the difficulty that the land of the Goldrace, according to the story, remains unconquered by the Tibetans.

The Tibetan name Gserrigs is found only in this source and seems to be otherwise completely unknown. The Sanskrit designation, however, is attested
in the Khotanese-Saka language as Svarṇagūtta- or ysarnai rrvī gūttairi  for a particular ‘golden royal family’. The element svarṇa is also found as part of the name of two kings of Kucha: Suvarṇapuṣpa and Suvarṇadeva. These ‘golden’ people or the royal family were originally located in the Shazhou region, i.e. the region of Dunhuang, which was accordingly also called the ‘Golden District’ (ysarnai bādā) or with similar appellations. Apart from the Khotanese texts, there seem to be also texts in Chinese and even Old Tibetan mentioning a ‘Gold Land’ or ‘Gold Family’ in Shazhou.

This may allow us to view the Goldrace as a branch of the Sakas or Scythians, a far-spread Indo-European people that may or may not have absorbed tribes of originally Turkic, Mongolic, or Siberian origin, but that was still dominated by an Iranian speaking elite, and that must still have had the anthropological features of the early Indo-Europeans, particularly fair skin and golden hair. It may be noted that these features have been preserved in some northern Tibetan nomadic tribes. It may have been this latter feature or the fact that they were extremely expert in gold manufacturing that acquired them their surname.

Women apparently had an unusual high status in Scythian society, and this could be an indication that the so-called Women’s Dominion was of Scythian origin. The Massagetes, a branch of the Scythians, who mainly lived in present-day Afghanistan, were ruled by a queen, when Alexander conquered them. Scythian women must have been very strong, they obviously could handle the strong flexed bow, and they apparently took part in war, as one has found graves of females with bows and arrows placed besides them, as in the case of their male counterparts. To a somewhat lesser extent one has found such graves also among the Xiongnu a mixed Turkic-Siberian and possibly Indo-European tribe. Legends concerning Alexander’s campaign would tell us also of another Amazone kingdom, which he was not able to conquer. Who knows, if this is not just a fairy tale, couldn’t that have been our Ladakhi Women’s Dominion?

Scythians and their associated tribes spread through Central Asia and southern Siberia from about the third millennium BCE onwards; from the first millennium onwards they also moved westwards, reaching Europe, where they become known by the Greeks. The Scythians are also very famous for their art work. In particular they developed, what is usually called the Nomadic Animal Style: deers, gazelles, and so on going tip-toe, often bending their head backwards, and most particularly, around the 5th century BCE, representations of animals often had an S-curve and spirals inscribed in their body. Rock carvings of this style have been found abundantly in Western Tibet (Mṇaḥrīs) and at a few places also in Ladakh, e.g. in Drang-tse and at a river crossing in Domkhar.

While the Chinese sources state that Greater Yangtong, that is Zhangzhung
proper, did not have any script, but used tallies and cords with knots like in early Tibet, they also state that an Indian type of script was current in the Women’s Dominion. Curiously enough, they state that it was used in the eastern part, but this must be an error; since the Indian script they refer to, cannot be but either the Karošt’hí or the Brāhmī script as current in Gilgit, Chilas, and even Lower Ladakh.

The people of the Women’s Dominion used to paint their face red; a custom also found among the Turko-Mongolian Tuyuhun/Hāza and the Tibetans, but they are also said to have venerated the asura, Iranian deities, and their burial customs differed significantly from that of the Tuyuhun. It is said that when a noble man died, they flayed the skin and put the bones and flesh mixed with gold into a jar, which they buried; the skin was buried a year later. New year was celebrated around the winter solstice, and in this connection they made use of a particular kind of divination:

“Our eleventh month is their first. Their custom is, as soon as the tenth month begins, to order a diviner to go into the mountains to make offerings of ch’u and to scatter in the air barley which has been steeped in wine. With great incantations he calls the birds. Suddenly a bird like a pheasant comes flying to the bosom of the diviner, who then splits its belly open and examines it. Whenever there is one grain of corn in it, the coming year will be fruitful; but if there is ‘hearth frost and snow’ there will be calamities” (Jiu Tangshu, Pelliot 1963: 700f.)

“At New Year they sacrifice men or monkeys […] When the sacrifice is over, they go into the mountains, where [a diviner] makes incantations. A bird like a female pheasant comes and perches on the [diviner’s] hand; he splits open the stomach and examines it. If there is grain, the year will be fruitful; if sand and gravel, there will be calamities” (Suishu, Pelliot 1963: 700f.)

A reverberation of this divination technique might perhaps be found in the Chanyaps, the ‘genealogy of the beer’, from a (Lower) Ladakh cycle of marriage songs: a cultural hero kills various birds and examines their stomach in search of the first grain; finally barley is found in the stomach of a pigeon and disseminated for the first time.

As for the women’s rule and the general characteristics of the country, the Chinese sources give the following details:

Women have been the rulers from generation to generation. The queen’s husband does not share in the government. The men have no other activity than to fight. The queen lives in a nine-storeyed house and has several hundred female attendants. Every five days, there is a council of state. There is also a little queen and both together attend to the government of the kingdom. When the queen dies, the people col-
select many gold coins and ask from the clan of the dead the two ablest women, one to be queen, and the second to be little queen. (Suishu; Pelliot 1963: 694f.)

“If she has no daughter to succeed the throne, the people of the kingdom levy and collect several millions of gold coins to buy from the family of the deceased sovereign a girl whom they put on the throne. In that country there are five men to three women. Women of nobility have many male attendants; men cannot have female attendants; even women in straitened conditions are always heads of a family, and have several husbands. When a child is born, he takes the surname (hsing) of his mother.” (Tangtien, Pelliot 1963: 695)

It is their custom for women to make light of men, but their natures are not jealous. Men and women paint their faces with different colours, which they sometimes change several times a day. All the people let their hair hang down. The climate is very cold and they live by hunting. The country produces brass, cinnaber, musk, yaks, and swift horses. Salt is particularly abundant, and they constantly carry it to India for sale, making profit of several hundred per cent. They have also often fought with India and the Tangut tribes. (Suishu; Pelliot 1963: 694f.)