


## deconstruction and reconstruction: foundations for the early history of Ladakh (and Baltistan)

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## 0. Introduction

From a modern western perspective, historical accounts are nothing but narrations or mere constructions, often serving political aims, such as rendering one's onwn 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 ursuper. For instance, many rulers of Purik claimed to be descendants of the Spurgyal dynasty of the Tibetan Impire. Similarly, some Kusāna rulers in India, an $8^{\text {th }}$ century ruler in Gandhāra, as well as some $10^{\text {th }}$ to $11^{\text {th }}$ century Turkish rulers in Central Asia pretended to be related to the Roman Emperors by bearing the name Ke saro 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 Spurgyalli rigs or Spurgyalli rays., the contracted forms of which became Spurays and Spurigs. 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 Puray 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.

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## 1. Witnesses for the early history

A great problem of early Tibetan history, that is, the time before Sroybrtsan Sgampo, 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 Žanžuy, of which Upper Ladakh may have been a part. Adding to this problem is the lack of defini-















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tion of boundaries and common denominations for the same geographical enties and, even worse, shifts in designations, either due to peoples' migrations or due to some political intensions. In the following I will list the few sources relevant for the present discussion:

1. The $12^{\text {th }}$ century Kashmirian Rājatarangiṇị is a very late retrospective source. It has nothing to say about the early prehistory of Ladakh or Baltistan, and references to events in the $6^{\text {th }}$ and $7^{\text {th }}$ century are extremely vage.
2. The most reliable sources are contemporaneous accounts from the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (mid $7^{\text {th }}$ century) and the Korean pilgrim Hyecho (early $7^{\text {th }}$ century). These accounts have been preserved in the historical writings of the Tang dynasty, where we find also some more information, ${ }^{\circ}$ gathered form foreign ambassadors or traders.
3. Incidentally one can find bits of geographical or political information in Sanskrit religious and secular literature, such as the Mahābhārata (compiled over a long period, but written down during the $1^{\text {st }}$ millenium CE) and the Harsacarita ( $7^{\text {th }}$ century). The most famous geographical work, the Bṛhatsamhitā, is unfortunately not very reliable with respect to the three northern sections, the coordinates having been mixed up completely.
4. The Geek sources of the $2^{\text {nd }}$ cenntury BCE to the $1^{\text {st }}$ century CE cover the lower Indus valley and remain silent about Ladakh. But one can derive some facts ex negativo.
5. Finally, there are some architectonical remains, mainly in Western Tibet (Myahris), dating some time between the late Bronze Age and the Common Era. Similarly some rock art in Western Tibet and Ladakh can be roughly dated to the $5^{\text {th }}$ century BCE or later.

## 2. Who were the early inhabitants?

If we were to believe A.H. Francke, the first inhabitants of Ladakh would have been Tibetan nomads, followed by Mon, and Dards; the latter would have enslaved the Mon and would thus be responsible for their present low status. The whole scenario merely reflects European colonial thinking, but is not based on solid facts. The deplorable low status of the Mon could equally well be explained by their late arrival, perhaps originally merely as seasonal labourers (like the present day Biharpa and Gorkha).

## 2.1 'Men Of No-where (MON)'

Local traditon in Upper Ladakh and Western Tibet (Myahris) ascribes some ancient buildings to the 'Mon', but the name itself barely means more than foreigner, more precisely perhaps 'southerner' and has been ap-






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plied by Tibetans to Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, as well as Indo-European tribes or people. In the Western Tibetan and Ladakhi context of ancient 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 prefer 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 Žayžun, either comprising Upper Ladakh or lying in between Tibet and Upper Ladakh was overthrown and conquered by Srongbrtsan Sgampo in the middle of the $7^{\text {th }}$ century. Only then (or perhaps even much later) did the process of Tibetanisation, including the immigration of Tibetans begin. The Ladvags Rgyalrabs mentions some earlier incursions by the Tibetans into the west, but these seem to have been merely raids, not affecting the ethnic composition of the country. The Korean pilgrim Hyecho, who passed through Chilas and Gilgit (Greater and Lesser Bolor) around 730 CE, speaks of Ladakh-Žayžuy (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 Rājatarangin̄̄̄ and a passage in the Harsacarita give further evidence that during the $6^{\text {th }}$ to $7^{\text {th }}$ century Ladakh and Western Tibet were under the sway of a Hephthalite/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.
















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### 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 Hindukush, 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 Indoaryan 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 approximatively 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 $3^{\text {rd }}$ 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 $18^{\text {th }}$ century) geographical knowl-
edge, it was taken for granted that the Darada were sitting in Western Tibet or at least all over Ladakh, while nobody seems to have payed attention to the fact that the region widely known as Upper Indus Valley lies - in pre-sent-day Pakistan. The reason for this apparent misnamer 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 confluent of the Indus, the source of which they located in Gilgit (a relattively late Arab geography, the $10^{\text {th }}$ century Hudūd-al-' $\overline{A l a m}$ even took the Kabul river as the main source).
And likewise the British did not recognise the true source until late in the $18^{\text {th }}$ 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 Khalatse, 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 explicitely, the genealogies of some Purik chiefdoms indicate that the Minaro and related tribes were late immigrants, settling in Ladakh around or after the $15^{\text {th }}$ 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-

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Ladakh at some earlier time, and some undatale 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 Saya (Shey; possibly referring to a camp ground).

### 2.4 Bhauṭta and Hephthalites (White Huns, Hūṇa)

The Rājatarañgiṇī 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 Bhautta, the opposite is impossible, hence the name must have originally referred to a non-Tibetan people of the Himalayas and the Karakorum. The Bhautta are first mentioned cursorily at the time of Mihirakula, the Hephthalite or Hūna conquerer of Kashmir and Northern India, that is in the first half of the $6^{\text {th }}$ century. The Bhautta are mentioned again, together with the Darada, about 200 years later as victims of Lalitā-ditya-Muktāpị̄a's raids or conquests. This Kashmirian ruler is said to first have conquered all of northern India before conquereing 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 Bhautta should have been located west of the Darada whom he conquered immediately afterwards on a route towards the east.























rectly reveiled that they might have practised polyiandry. 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 reknown for their headresses with as many horns fixed as they had husbands. An extremely white skin, especially 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 $7^{\text {th }}$ century Harsacarita that the Hūna, as the Hephthalites or a related group were called in India, were sitting right at the foot of the Kailash, which is somewhat surprising, since after their defeat by the combined forces of the Sassanians 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 certain 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 $11^{\text {th }}$ century, thus even before the Rājatarañininī 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 remaining insecurity about the location of the Kailash during the Harsa's reign, the equation of the Bhautta with the Hephtalites and the location of the Hephthalites in Western Tibet remains somewhat problematic. But, it also remains unclear whether the entries concerning the Bhautta really refer to Ladakh or at least Baltistan. If not, the Bhautta might well have been identical 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 Žayžuy (including, most probably, Upper Ladakh). In that case, we could conclude that the population of Žayžuy (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.

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## 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 $7^{\text {th }}$ 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 Žayžuy）， Suvarnagotra（land of the＇Goldrace＇），and Nüguo／Strīrājya（＇Women＇s Dominion）．That all three names referred to the same entity and not to sev－ eral adjoining smaller entities becomes clear from the explicit identifica－ tion between Suvarnagotra and Nüguo by Xuanzang，on the one hand，and by identical coordinates for Lesser Yangtong and Suvarnagotra，namely 2.700 to 3000 li（i．e．ca． 870 to 1000 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 Ti－ bet，shows that the Chinese authors were dealing with the same geographi－ cally and politically not very well definable entity，that apparently streched 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 Suvarnagotra 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 Swāt valley，which was likewise notorious for its independent women，also known as ḍākin̄̄ or mkhalgroma．
A Strīrājya is mentioned in the Rājataranginịi，as one of the countries con－ quered by Lalitāditya－Muktāp̣̄̄̆a．He is said to have errected a Shiva statue there，which would perhaps better fit the Swāt valley than Ladakh．An ad－ ditional source，not mentioned in the beginning，the Vimalaprabhāpari－ prcchā or Drimamedpaḷiōdkyis žuspa，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 Skarrdo，on the other．Again we face the problem that this Skarrdo does not necessarily need to be identical with present day Skardo，but independent of this ques－ tion，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 Skarrdo 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，ot 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 oth－ erwise completely unknown．The Sanskrit designation，however，is attested

























in the Khotanese-Saka language as Svarnagūttar- or ysarnai rrvī gūttairi for a particular 'golden royal family'. The element suvarna is also found as part of the name of two kings of Kucha: Suvarnapuspa 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' (ysarrnai bādä) 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 TurkicSiberian 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 millenium 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 $5{ }^{\text {th }}$ 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 (Myahris) and at a few places also in Ladakh, e.g. in Drangtse and at a river crossing in Domkhar.

While the Chinese sources state that Greater Yangtong, that is Zhangzhung













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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 Karoṣthī 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/Haža 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 of 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 solistice, 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 ist belly open and examines it. Whenever there is one grain of corn in it, the coming year will be fruitful; but if there is ,hoarfrost 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 Chayraps, the 'genealogy of the beer', from a (Lower) Ladakhi 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-








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lect 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." (Tungtien, 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 Tangutan tribes. (Suishu; Pelliot 1963: 694f.)

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