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The Emergence of a Myth : In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon

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CHAPTER TWO
THE *MDO 'DUS*

INTRODUCTION

As previously mentioned, there are three complete life accounts of Shenrab, a short account (*mDo 'dus*), a mid-length (*gZer mig*) and a long account (*gZi brjid*), published in the collection of the Bon *bKa' 'gyur*;[33] not counting what appears to be a summary of the long account, which is available separately.[34] These accounts were identified as *mdo* (Skt. *sūtra*), and are included in the sūtra section of the Bon *bKa' 'gyur*.[35] Although these three accounts all tell the story of the life of Shenrab, their contents and literary style differ in many ways. In this chapter, I will mainly discuss the short account, the *mDo 'dus*, and try to solve the question of when it first appeared. However, prior to discussing the short account, I shall briefly introduce the other two accounts here in reverse order.

The longest account of Shenrab Miwo, the *gZi brjid*, consists of twelve volumes with sixty-one chapters. Traditionally, this work is considered to have been taught by Shenrab himself, and to have been orally transmitted through many Bonpo masters, up to Tulku Loden Nyingpo (b. 1360 AD), who is credited with transcribing it. Loden Nyingpo was a renowned Bonpo master and author, and was

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[33] Similar to the way that Tibetan Buddhists attribute the *bKa' 'gyur* to the Buddha, Bonpos attribute the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* to Shenrab. Karmay (1975; reprint 1998, p. 124) suggests that the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* was compiled around 1450 AD, although the classification of Bon *bKa' and bKa' brten* dates from the 11th-century AD. Since 1985, the collection of the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* has been published three times in three different editions (see Martin 2003, p. 2 and 784).

[34] This is the *Dri med rtsa mdo* by Loden Nyingpo (b. 1360 AD), which, as far as I have been able to check, appears to be a summary of the *gZi brjid*. Lhagyal (2002, p. 383-84) identifies this text as the fourth complete life account of Shenrab Miwo.

[35] The collection of Bon sūtras consists of works dealing with monastic discipline, cosmology and life accounts of Shenrab. The three accounts also share a part of the title, *Ḥdus pa rin po che'i rgyud*, which suggests that these may also belong to the *rgyud* (Skt. *tantra*) section, although the tantra collection mainly contains esoteric teachings. For the categorisation of Bon sūtra and tantra see Karmay 1975 (reprint 1998, p. 126).

a master of the New Bon sect, which is closely connected with the Buddhist Nyingmapa tradition. Whatever the traditional account prior to the 14th century might have been, the text itself is certainly dateable from the late 14th century.

The middle-length account of Shenrab Miwo, the *gZer mig*, contains eighteen chapters in two volumes. This work came into existence somewhere around the late 11th to the early 12th century AD. I have found a passage from the *gZer mig* quoted in the *Khams chen po brgyad* commentary written by Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106).[36] This commentary is the earliest source that I have discovered so far that proves that the *gZer mig* existed from that period. As Karmay (1975a; reprint 1998, p. 170) has discussed, passages from the *gZer mig* are also quoted by the Bonpo master Meton Sherab Ozer (1058–1132 or 1118–1192 AD) in his *Ḋul ba kun las btus pa'i gzhung*.[37]

THE SHORT ACCOUNT, THE *MDO 'DUS*

The short account of Shenrab Miwo, the *mDo 'dus*, contains twenty-four chapters in one volume.[38] Judging from the composition of its narratives, the *mDo 'dus*

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[36] See Tsultrim Palchen 1998, pp. 159, 173, 216, 223, 228, 244, 262.

[37] Martin (2001, pp. 75-76) dates Meton Sherab Ozer to 1118-1192 AD.

[38] I have accessed three versions of the *mDo 'dus*, which differ somewhat in their content and spelling. I shall refer to the one published in the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* simply as the *mDo 'dus*. The version obtained by Samten Karmay, I shall refer to as the *mDo 'dus* Karmay, and the version obtained by Dondup Lhagyal I shall refer to as *mDo 'dus* Lhagyal. I am very grateful to Samten Karmay and Dondup Lhagyal for sharing the latter two copies as this has enabled me to compare three different versions. I am working on a critical edition of these three versions, which I will publish separately from this dissertation. The *mDo 'dus* first became accessible to scholars outside Tibet in 1985, when a copy of the first version was published in India by Khedup Gyatso. His copy is a reprint of the original copy preserved in the Khyungpo Ri Tsedrug monastery in Tibet. The current version that I use is also a reprint of the original and it was published in the collection of the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* from 1995 to 1999. A copy of the second version was obtained by Samten G. Karmay during his research mission in Tibet in 1985. Karmay assumes that the original copy belonged to Walkhyung (Tib. *dbal khyung*) monastery, as he found the title, *'Dus pa rin po che'i rgyud sangs rgyas rnam thar*, in the list of Bon texts preserved in Walkhyung monastery in Nyagrong (cf. Karmay 1990; reprint 1998, p. 206). However, the title that appears

seems to be the oldest among the three complete life accounts of Shenrab Miwo. Furthermore, the passages in the *mDo 'dus*, compared to the other two, are less organized and less elaborate, which implies that the hagiography was a work in progress.

The *mDo 'dus* is not limited to the story of the then current incarnation of Shenrab, but also covers details of his past lives that are comparable to the Jātaka stories of the Buddha Śākyamuni, which I will discuss in chapter four. Most of the *mDo 'dus* narratives are presented in the style of a dialogue between Shenrab and his family members and attendants. Interestingly, some significant passages in the source contradict each other and are inconsistent. For instance, Shenrab is described on one occasion as 'the enlightened one' who is perfect and makes no mistakes. However, he is also reported to have made mistakes like any ordinary human being.[39] This description is not found in the other two accounts—probably omitted because it was considered inappropriate.

The passages regarding the life account of Shenrab Miwo from the *mDo 'dus*, which are less elaborate, inconsistent and more similar to the legends of the Buddha than the passages in the *gZer mig*, suggest that the *mDo 'dus* must be

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on the copy obtained by Karmay (see *mDo 'dus* Karmay) and the title given in the list of Bon texts preserved in Walkhyung monastery differ. This leaves open the question as to whether Karmay obtained a copy of the same text that appears in the list. A copy of the third version was obtained by Dondup Lhagyal in 1998, in Nagchukha in Tibet, from a Tibetan doctor named A-rgya. Lhagyal (2002) argues that the original must be at least 800 years old, as it contains many old spellings of words as seen in inscriptions and in Dunhuang documents. It is also written in a Tibetan script called *'bru tsha sgong zhabs ma*, which he claims was widely used during the Sakyapa rule in Tibet (mid 13th to the mid 14th-century) and which was rarely used thereafter. The latter two versions are unpublished. The original manuscripts of the version in the Bon *bKa' 'gyur* and the *mDo 'dus* Lhagyal are still in Tibet, but whereabouts of Karmay's *mDo 'dus* are still unknown.

[39] The *mDo 'dus* (pp. 107-109) uniquely records that Shenrab made four big mistakes, which caused him some misfortune. Shenrab accepted a relative who interfered in his business; he married a wife who betrayed him and ran away with another man; he accepted a student who stole his library; and he made a friend who stole his horses. I am grateful to Professor Samten Karmay for pointing out these interesting passages to me.

older than the latter life account of Shenrab, *gZer mig*. Although the available evidence (see *infra* p. 46) seems to show that both sources are equally dateable from the late 11th or 12th century onwards, the redaction, nature of the elaborations and other differences between these two sources (see, e.g., appendix 3.2) suggest a probable relative chronology. It recommends that the *mDo 'dus* should be dated before the 12th century and the *gZer mig* slightly later, and that the two sources thus are not from the exact same period. For this dissertation, I have selected the *mDo 'dus* as probably the oldest and primary source among the three complete life accounts of Shenrab Miwo. This choice is not only motivated by the more archaic-looking state of transmission of the *mDo 'dus*, but I also felt that it was important to work on this particular text because it has not yet received sufficient academic treatment.

The short account of the life of Shenrab Miwo, the *mDo 'dus*, has many resemblances to the legend of the Buddha as recorded in the *rGya cher rol pa*. Since most of the investigations in this dissertation involve comparing narratives from the *mDo 'dus* to the narratives from selected Buddhist sources, it is very important to establish when the *mDo 'dus* first appeared. To estimate the date of this work, I will first study its colophon to determine what is traditionally known about the origin of this text. Thereupon, I will look at narratives relating to the discovery of the *mDo 'dus* and will discuss the quotations from, and references to, the *mDo 'dus* found in other Bon sources.

THE COLOPHON OF THE *MDO 'DUS*

As the first logical step, I shall look at the colophon of this particular text to discuss its possible date of writing. Two claims regarding the dating of the *mDo 'dus* can be found in the colophon. First, Bonpo scholars claim that the *mDo 'dus* consists of teachings of Shenrab Miwo and thus consider it to be more than several thousand years old. Second, the *mDo 'dus* was translated by an early Bonpo translator, *snya* Lishu Tagring, from the original, which was written in the

'divine language' or 'the language of the eternal god' (Tib. *g.yung drung lha'i skad*). Lishu Tagring is considered to be a contemporary of Vairocana, a well-known Tibetan Buddhist translator, who lived in the 8th century AD (Karmay 1972, p. 4 and 160). There are more than twenty Bon texts said to have been translated by Lishu Tagring.[40] Unfortunately, very little is known about his life from these texts. He is said to have translated the *mDo 'dus*, when he worked as a translator at the court of the King Trisong Detsen (8th century AD), and to have concealed it at the order of the king.

The first claim is not justifiable, because the existence of Shenrab Miwo and his role as the founder of Bon has not yet been proven. This attribution is obviously influenced by the belief that emerged from the 10th century AD onward, that the Bon religion existed long before Buddhism emerged, and was founded by Shenrab Miwo.

With regard to the second claim, a critical analysis of this assertion results in the following problems. Firstly, if we regard the *mDo 'dus* as a translation, the language of the original text is hard to identify. Secondly, the existence of Lishu Tagring has not been historically validated. Besides, there is no physical evidence to support the existence of any Bon text prior to the earliest discoveries in 913 AD.

Nevertheless, this claim that the *mDo 'dus* was translated by Lishu Tagring in the 8th century AD, could be based on historical fact. It corresponds to the time as well as the original language from which the *rGya cher rol pa*, the Tibetan version of the *Lalitavistara*, was translated by the Buddhists. The 'language of eternal god' or the 'divine language' (Tib. *lha'i skad*) is considered by the Bonpos

[40] Many of these texts are published in the *Bon bKa' 'gyur* (2nd edition), see volume 33, 40, 60, 100, 109, 145, 165, 170, and 190; and in the *Bon bKa' brten* volume 20, 23, 27, 44, 56, 86, 87, 91, 113, 122, 142, 189, 241, 242, and 269. Although the names of the translators recorded in the above texts are slightly different, I assume that they are to be identified as sNya Lishu Tagring, the translator of the *mDo* 'dus. The name appears in these texts with the following spelling variances: snya Li shi stag ring, bsnya chen [Li shu stag ring], snyag chen Le shu stag ring, gnyen bon Li shu stag ring, gnyan Li shu stag ring, snyan chen Li shu, bla ma Li shu and just Li shu.

to be the source language of the *mDo 'dus*. In the same way, Sanskrit is considered by Buddhists to be their source language. Both Tibetan Buddhists and Bonpos refer to Sanskrit as the divine language (Tib. *lha'i skad*). Although there is little information in Bon sources concerning the 'divine language',[41] it is possible that the Bonpos were actually referring to Sanskrit. In the *mDo 'dus*, there are Sanskrit words such as *ratna* and *tantra*, which are identified as being words from the eternal divine language. This suggests that the *mDo 'dus* might well be a Bonpo translation of Buddhist legends that were written in the 'divine language' (Tib. *lha'i skad*), i.e. Sanskrit. Among the legends translated by the Bonpos could indeed be parts of the *Lalitavistara*, yet, due to many extant differences between the *mDo 'dus* and the *Lalitavistara*, we have no certainty regarding this.

It is conceivable that the belief that the *mDo 'dus was* originally written in the eternal divine language could have derived from part of its title, *g.Yung drung lha'i bon mdo* which means the 'eternal divine Bon teaching.' The term *lha* 'god' in the title is replaced on several occasions in the *mDo 'dus* with *dag pa* 'purity,' thus it is alternatively called pure Bon (Tib. *dag pa'i bon*). This alternation of the words *lha* and *dag pa* in the *mDo 'dus* seems to suggest that the Bonpos perceived the phrase *lha'i bon* 'divine Bon' to be equivalent to *dag pa'i bon* 'pure Bon.' Since the *mDo 'dus* was received as *g.Yung drung lha'i bon mdo* 'eternal divine Bon teaching,' the Bonpos may have assumed that the *mDo 'dus* was translated from the 'eternal divine language.'

DISCOVERY OF THE *MDO 'DUS*

Since the traditional claims of dating the *mDo 'dus* to the 8th century or before are doubtful, I shall look at the story of the discovery of the *mDo 'dus*. To begin with, I shall discuss the discovery of the *mDo chen po bzhi*, 'the four great sūtras', because it is closely related to the discovery of the *mDo 'dus*. The four great sūtras according to the colophon of the *Chags 'jig mdo* are:

[41] On a traditional account of the language of the eternal god, see Karmay 1972, pp. 16-17.

1. *Dus gsum ston pa 'byung khung*(s) *mdo* (short title: *'Byung khungs mdo*),

2. *sNod rten 'byung ba 'jig rten chags 'jig mdo* (short title: *Chags 'jig mdo*),

3. *Bla med go 'phang sgrub thabs kyi mdo* (short title: *sGrub thabs mdo*) and

4. *Srid pa khams gsum sems can skye 'chi mdo* (short title: *Khams gsum skye 'chi mdo*).

The existence of these four sūtras almost a thousand year ago is evident, as the list of the four sūtras is given in the colophons of the *Chags 'jig mdo* and the *sGrub thabs mdo*, in the colophons of the *gZer mig* and in the commentary to Bon Prajñāpāramitā written by *rme' u* Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106).

In the *Chags 'jigs mdo*, it is recorded that these sūtras were translated into Tibetan (the original language from which they were translated is not identified) by *snya* Lishu Tagring and were offered to the King Trisong Deutsen (8th century AD). The King ordered these texts to be hidden in the red stūpa of the Samye temple. The author of the *Chags 'jigs mdo* does not provide the actual narrative of the discovery, but recommends consulting another text, *Le'u dang rtsis 'byung chen mo,* for a more detailed account (cf. *Chags 'jigs mdo*, p. 227). Unfortunately, this recommended source is not available to us today. Therefore, I shall turn to the colophon of the third sūtra, *sGrub thabs mdo*, for the remaining part of the story.

I utilize these two colophons to elaborate my discussion because they are both from the same collection, the four sūtras. Like the colophon of the *Chags 'jigs mdo*, the *sGrub thabs mdo* also informs us that the four sūtras were translated into Tibetan by Lishu Tagring, who offered them to the King Trisong Deutsen. Furthermore, the colophon of the *sGrub thabs mdo* states that they were hidden in the red stūpa of Samye temple, and that they later emerged from that stūpa in the year of the Iron-bird. Tre Gyagar Ratsa retrieved these texts and transmitted them to Phurpa Bar, a head priest from *dbus*, central Tibet. It is further stated that Towa Josay Shenrab Gyal later copied the original manuscripts, probably from the original that is said to have been in the custody of Phurpa Bar (cf. *sGrub thabs mdo*, p. 537). According to the colophons of some chapters listed in the *sGrub*

thabs mdo, there are several texts said to have been discovered in the red stūpa in the Samye Temple by Tre Gyagar Ratsa and Segu Rinchen (cf. Martin 2003, pp. 172–77).[42] These two people are identified in later sources as caretakers of Samye Temple, but there seems to be confusion among later Bonpos as to how they were identified as caretakers. As I will elaborate later in this chapter, these two names are probably constructed from the names of three *ācāryas*, namely Konchog Dragpa, Nyamo Gonpo and Seku Ratna.[43]

Partly following the colophons of the two of the four sūtras, Gaton Tsultrim Gyaltsen (13th–14th century)[44] wrote in his history of Bon treasures, the *gTer gyi kha byang*, that the four sūtras were discovered in the red stūpa of Samye temple. He described this discovery as Samye Catima, named after *ca ti*, a word that derived from Sanskrit *caitya* stūpa. According to Gaton, the discovery of the four sūtras is also known as the northern treasure of *dbu mchod* (his full name is *dbu mchod* Phurnagbar) from Samye (Tib. *bsam yas byang gter dbu mchod ma*).[45] Gaton writes that some scrolls emerged for the first time from behind the old bricks (Tib. *so phag gog pa*) of a red stūpa in Samye temple. When the scrolls turned out to be Bon texts, they were thrown into the fire. Because of this desacralizing act, thereafter, many unpleasant incidents followed. In the Iron-bird year, more scrolls emerged again, from the same place. The local people were afraid of the disasters that had occurred previously, and this time prevented the scrolls from being burnt. They were hidden again under the stūpa (cf. Tib. *lder*

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[42] There is another story regarding the discovery of the four sūtras in the *gZer mig*, for which I refer the reader to my forthcoming article in the *PIATS* 2006.

[43] The three *ācāryas* (but here Nepalese *ācāryas*) are said to be the earliest group who went to Tibet and discovered, literally stole, some boxes from the Samye temple in the early 10th-century AD (913 AD, in Nyima Tenzin 1965a). For more details, see Karmay 1972, p. 118-20. The *brGyud rim* (Khoepung 1929, cf. Martin 2003, p. 53.) also informs us about the two *ācāryas* (Tib. *a tsa ra mi gnyis*) discovering the four sūtras, here including the *mDo ḋus* as the first sūtra.

[44] He must have lived sometime in the 13th-century (see Gurung forthcoming *PIATS 2006*, also cf. Martin 2001, pp. 41, 99, 127 and 240.

[45] Gaton's text on this discovery is based on the colophon of the *sGrub thabs mdo*, p. 537.

so/bzo) in the Samye temple. Two caretakers of the temple, Tre Gyagar Ratsa and Segu Rinchen Dakpa, took the scrolls out of the stūpa for the third time forty-nine years after that incident. They loaded the treasure of scrolls on the backs of horses and mules, and left Samye that night. After crossing the land of Kongpo, they reached the south of Khams, where the two caretakers met Tirgyi Uton (also pronounced as Dirgyi Wuton), who was a student of Zhuye Legpo. They asked Tirgyi Uton whether he was interested in having the scrolls they had carried from Samye. Uton was not convinced and replied sceptically that there exists no treasure other than the discovery by Shenchen Luga (996–1035 AD). Thereupon, they traded the six boxes containing the scrolls for food with Sumpa Taton,[46] a student of Lhari Nyenpo from Gurzhog and *rgya* Trije (he was probably from China). To cut a long story short, Sumpa Taton later gave custody of these treasures to one of his patrons, from whom a priest-physician named *dbu mchod* Phurnag Bar (also called Phurpa Bar) obtained them (Gaton 2005, pp. 49–54).

A well-known Bonpo master from the 19th century, Nyima Tenzin (1965, p. 30), follows the story mentioned above in the *Chags 'jig mdo* and *sGrub thabs mdo*, and wrote that the four sūtras were discovered in the red stūpa of Samye temple, in the Iron-bird year. Among the three possibilities of the Iron-bird year between the late 10th to 11th century AD: 961, 1021 and 1081 AD,[47] Nyima Tenzin

[46] As his name indicates, he was probably from the land of Sumpa. In Gaton's history, he is called *rta ston*, meaning 'horse master,' while in some other texts he is called, *lho ston* 'southern master', *rdo ston* 'stone/vajra master' and *gto ston* 'ritual master'. The word *ston* seems to be a particular type of title given to Tibetan scholar during the medieval period, although I am not certain how exactly this title was conferred upon the scholar. There is also a Buddhist scholar named *rta ston*, who lived in the early 12th century AD, recorded in Kozhul & Gyalwa (1992, p. 721).

[47] It is difficult to determine the Iron-bird year in the traditional Tibetan dating system, unless the number of the cycle is also clearly indicated. One complete cycle of the Tibetan lunar calendar consists of sixty years, called a *rab 'byung* (Skt. *prabhava*). Each year is calculated on the basis of the twelve animals and five elements, thus each cycle has one Iron-bird year. See Schuh 1973 for the cycles of sixty years and their equivalents in the western calender. In the second part of his book, Schuh provides a very detailed table of all the months and years since the first year of the first sixty year cycle (i.e. 1027 AD) until the 45th year of the sixteenth sixty year cycle (i.e. 1972

estimated the year to be 961 AD. Many scholars seem to agree with this date proposed by Nyima Tenzin.[48]

Lhagyal (2002, p. 388) more specifically argues that the discovery of the four sūtras took place in 1021 AD, so, sixty years later than 961 AD.[49] Lhagyal closely follows the story recorded in Gaton's history for his calculation[50] and argues that 961 AD is too early because of the following reasons. As recorded in Gaton's history, two caretakers first met a student of Zhuye Legpo and had a conversation with the student regarding the discovery of Shenchen Luga. As Lhagyal writes, there would be a chronological problem if we were to assume these events took place around 961 AD, the date in which the four sūtras were discovered according to Nyima Tenzin. First, the meeting of the two caretakers and Tirgyi Uton would not have been possible. Since Tirgyi Uton was a student of Zhuye Legpo (1002–1081 AD) when he received the treasures, the meeting could not have taken place before Zhuye's birth in 1002 AD.[51]

Second, as Lhagyal has pointed out, a conversation between the two caretakers and Tirgyi Uton regarding the discovery of Shenchen Luga (996–1035 AD) is not possible before the actual discovery took place in 1017 AD.[52] Therefore, 961 AD is too early for the discovery of the four sūtras. The next date

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AD, until January). Although two of the dates (equivalent to the Iron-bird year) given above are beyond the starting date of Schuh's table, using his table, we can calculate backward to determine these two dates. There is also a very interesting article by Svante Janson, titled Tibetan Calendar Mathematics, which is published on the server of the Department of Mathematics at Uppsala University (Janson 2007). He has also supplied a list of the cycles of sixty years and summaries of several different Tibetan calendar traditions.

[48] Cf. Karmay 1998 (p. 110, 207) and Mimaki 2000 (p. 89, 95, 97). Their discussions regarding the date also seem to be based on the Iron-bird year, when the four sūtras were discovered.

[49] Martin (2001, p. 45 and 1999, p. 263) and Kvaerne (2007, p. 84) also prefer to date the discovery with the early 11th-century AD.

[50] Lhagyal's main source for his discussion is the 15th-century history by Patsun (Patsun 1991), which follows closely to Gaton's history (Gaton 1998).

[51] For a biography of Zhuye Legpo, see Martin 2001, pp. 81-92. Also see Kvaerne 1971, p. 229 and Karmay 2003, p. 38.

[52] See Martin 2001 for a detailed study on the life and discovery of Shenchen Luga.

Lhagyal considered best is 1021 AD, sixty years later than the traditional date. However, this date is again unsuitable for the actual discovery, because it is too early for the meeting of two caretakers and Sumpa Taton, the student of Lhari Nyenpo. We know from the available sources that Lhari Nyenpo (also known as *rme ston* Lhari Nyenpo) was born in 1024 and died in 1091 AD (Nyima Tenzin 1965a, pp. 31-32).[53] Since Lhari Nyenpo was born in 1024, the aforementioned meeting between his student Sumpa Taton and the two caretakers would not have been possible soon after 1021 AD. One might assume that the actual meeting took place several years after the discovery, yet it would not have been possible for Lhari Nyenpo to teach his student until he was fully grown himself. Such a meeting could not have taken place at least before the mid 11th century. If we consider the Iron-bird year as the year that the two caretakers discovered the four sūtras, then the best option seems to be 1081 AD, instead of 1021 AD.

Nevertheless, I should like to propose another date, by examining the narrative that is uniquely recorded in the *gTer gyi kha byang* (Gaton 2005). According to the first part of the passage in this text, the scrolls emerged for the first time in the Iron-bird year, and then were hidden anew in the stūpa. The scrolls were then retrieved again forty-nine years later by two caretakers. Thus, it was not in the Iron-bird year when the actual discovery by the two caretakers took place according to this source, but forty-nine years later. If we add forty-nine years to 1081 AD, we get 1130 AD, which is in fact too late for the discovery and also for all the meetings that I have discussed above. In addition, a reference to the four sūtras does already appear in a work by rMe'u Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106) as noted above. In this case, the actual date of the discovery was probably 1070 AD, forty-nine years after the Iron-bird year, i.e. 1021 AD. If Gaton is right, then I assume that the year 1070 AD seems to be the most suitable date for the discovery of the four great sūtras. However, this conclusion remains uncertain, as no source

[53] See also Kvaerne (1971, pp. 229-30) and Martin (2001, p. 69, 244).

earlier than Gaton's history refers to the gap of forty-nine years.[54]

As discussed above, we so far have two dates: 1070 AD and 1081 AD. Although I cannot determine which of the two dates is the most suitable, I can conclude that the four sūtras were discovered in the second half of the 11th century. But how is the date of the discovery of the four sūtras related to the date of the discovery of the *mDo 'dus*? In order to answer this question, I shall look at the first of the four sūtras, the so-called *'Byung khungs mdo*.

THE FIRST SŪTRA, *'BYUNG KHUNGS MDO*

There is confusion among Bonpo scholars in terms of identifying the first of the four sūtras. Among the four great sūtras, only three are available to us under their actual titles. No text is available for the first sūtra, with the title *'Byung khungs mdo* and thus we cannot identify it conclusively. We can only infer what its contents are on the basis of references from early sources and from its title. The title explicitly indicates that the first sūtra contains accounts of the origin of the Bonpo Buddhas of the past, present and future. Bonpo scholars from later centuries either identified the *mDo 'dus* or the *gZer mig* as the first text, because these are the only two early sources containing such accounts.

I shall first discuss how early Bonpo authors identified that first sūtra, the *'Byung khungs mdo*. According to the *Chags 'jigs mdo*, the *'Byung khungs mdo* contains eighteen chapters in total, the contents of which correspond to the chapters in the *gZer mig,* while the *mDo 'dus* is not mentioned. This suggests that the *gZer mig* indeed is the first sūtra.

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[54] There is an interesting passage in the history by Kundrol Dakpa (1998, p. 306). Kundrol Dakpa has described the issue of the forty-nine years differently. He writes that two of the three ācāryas, Kondrag (Konchog Drakpa) and Serin (Segu Rinchen), returned to Lhasa forty-nine years after their first discovery in 913 AD. This time, the two discovered, six boxes in the red stūpa at Samye. This discovery of six boxes corresponds well with the story recorded in Gaton's history, and the resulting year, perhaps co-incidently, also is 961 AD (i.e. Iron-bird year). This confirms that Kundrol and Gaton were writing about the same collection.

The author of the *gZer mig* maintains that his text forms part of the first sūtra (*gZer mig*, pp. 810–11). But the *'Byung khungs mdo* includes more. According to the *gZer mig*, the first sūtra also contains a detailed account of the past and the future Buddhas of Bon, while the *gZer mig* depicts a detailed life of Shenrab. This suggests that the first sūtra was a source of the *gZer mig* and contains other materials that presently cannot be identified.[55]

Gaton (2005, p. 43), however, in his *gTer gyi kha byang* attributed the discovery of the *gZer mig* to Drangtsun, a monk from the Drangnga family, who is said to have discovered the Drangngama group of texts.[56] Yet, Gaton did not clearly specify that the first sūtra is the *mDo 'dus*. This nonetheless implicitly excludes the *gZer mig* from the list of the four sūtras and therefore also suggests that the *gZer mig* is not the *'Byung khungs mdo*, the first of the four sūtras. In this 13th-century text by Gaton, the position of the *mDo 'dus* as the first sūtra is merely implied.

The titles of the four sūtras are also found in an early 14th-century text, called *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo*;[57] although they are not classified as the four sūtras. Unlike Gaton, who considered these texts to be the so-called Catima discovery, the author of the above text, Gyer Thokmay, maintained that they were the so-called Drangngama discovery. By describing the four sūtras as the Drangngama discovery, the author might have assumed the *gZer mig* to be the first sūtra. He did not provide any information about the existence of the *mDo 'dus*.

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[55] This thesis has been developed in Blezer (2010, p. 15)

[56] For the list of Drangngama texts, see Gaton 2005, p. 44-46. This discovery is called Drangngama as it being discovered by the monk named Sermig from Drangnga family.

[57] This text is said to have been discovered by Gyer Thokmay (alias Khoepo Lodoe Thokmay, b. 1292) on the 15th of the first autumn month (i.e. generally the 6th or the 7th month) of the Iron-dog year, i.e. 1310 AD. Cf. Kvaerne (1975, p. 27, note 48) and Karmay (1972, p. 181, note 1) for the date.

Furthermore, I found a single reference to the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo* in the *bsGrags pa gling grags* (p. 14).[58] The other three sūtras are not mention in this source. According to this text, the first sūtra, the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo*, contains a detailed account of the lives of the thousand Buddhas and Shenrab's parents. Such a detailed account of the thousand Buddhas is neither recorded in the *mDo 'dus* nor in the *gZer mig*. This suggests that the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo* is a large collection of biographical accounts, perhaps separate from the *mDo 'dus* and the *gZer mig*.

In the 15th-century history of Bon,[59] Patsun Tengyal Zangpo quoted many passages from the *mDo 'dus*, which proves that this was an important source for his work. However, nowhere did he discuss the history of the *mDo 'dus*. Perhaps this is because he identifies the *mDo 'dus* as being the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo,* in which case it is not necessary to discuss it separately from the four sūtras. Following almost literally Gaton's *gTer gyi kha byang*, Patsun Tengyal Zangpo (Patsun 1991, pp. 232–34) has discussed the discovery of the four sūtras in great detail. Patsun seems to be the first historian who excluded the *gZer mig* explicitly from the four sūtras, while calling it Drangngama. When the *gZer mig* was not anymore identified as belonging to the four sūtras, the position of the *mDo 'dus* as the first sūtra became secured in Bonpo scholarship.

The position of the *mDo 'dus* among the four sūtras has been further discussed by Kundrol Dakpa (b. 1700 AD) and Nyima Tenzin (1813–1875 AD), who have provided details on the contents and the number of chapters that match the *mDo 'dus*. These two scholars listed the titles of the four sūtras in their catalogues of the Bon *bKa' 'gyur*, in which the first sūtra, the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo*, is identified as the *mDo 'dus*. According to Kundrol Dakpa's catalogue, composed

[58] The date of this text, *bsGrags pa gling grags*, is uncertain, but it is likely to be between the 12th century (cf. Martin: 1997, p. 28) to 14th century AD. See also Blezer (2010, p. 21) for other options for a dating of this source.

[59] The exact year in which this history was written is unknown. There are two conflicting views. It is said to be written either in the year of the wood-mouse, i.e. 1444 AD according to the edition published in 1991 (Patsun 1991) or in the year of the wood-bird, i.e. 1405 or 1465 according to the edition published in 1972. See Martin 1997 (pp. 78-79) and 2003 (pp. 658-59).

in 1751 AD (Iron-sheep year), the four sūtras were discovered in the red stūpa at Samye by two Buddhist monks Seku[60] Rinchen and Dre rgya ra tsa (Kundrol 1993, pp. 102–4). Kundrol Dakpa not only informed us about the number of chapters, which matches exactly the number of chapters in the present version of the *mDo 'dus*, but also added few extra words like *mDo 'dus pa rin chen* in the title, which evidently is the partial title of the *mDo 'dus*, i.e. *mDo 'dus pa rin po che'i rgyud*. This modification of the title contributed to a radical turn in the history of the *mDo 'dus* and the *gZer mig*.

Likewise, Nyima Tenzin in his catalogue also specified that the first sūtra, the *'Byung khungs mdo*, is known as the *mDo 'dus* and contains twenty-four chapters.[61] He attributed this work to two ācāryas, whom Kundrol Dakpa called two Buddhist monks and who are said to be the revealers of the four sūtras. Nyima Tenzin also labelled this work as the short account of Shenrab's life (Tib. *mdzad mdo bsdus pa*), whereas he called the *gZer mig*, *mDzad mdo 'bring po*, 'the middle-length account.' Moreover, Nyima Tenzin argued in his catalogue against the claim that the *gZer mig* is the first of the four sūtras. He specified no source for his argument, yet it is obvious that he refers to some of the earlier sources that were discussed above. Following these two scholars, most contemporary Bonpo scholars regard the *mDo 'dus* as the first of the four sūtras, which were discovered in the red stūpa in Samye.

Now, if we consider the *mDo 'dus* to be the first of the four sūtras, as is traditionally claimed, then we may estimate the discovery of the *mDo 'dus* to be in the second half of the 11th century. However, all these datings are based on the traditional view that the *mDo 'dus* was discovered as one of the four sūtras, and this view can only be traced from the 13th to 14th century onwards. No contemporaneous evidence is available to establish that the *mDo 'dus* is one of the

[60] In Kundrol Dakpa this is also spelled *pang ku* instead of *sad gu*, but this is probably a misinterpretation, as both the words are written almost identically in Tibetan *dbu med* script. .

[61] Nyima Tenzin 1965, p. 3, Kvaerne 1975, p. 99.

four sūtras. Yet, I do not rule out the possibility that this view could have originated before the 13th century.

REFERENCES TO THE *MDO 'DUS*

The references to the *mDo 'dus* found in other sources support the view that the *mDo 'dus* did exist in the early centuries of the second millennium. Even though there are more than three different titles of the *mDo 'dus*, the common title for all of them is *mDo 'dus pa rin po che'i rgyud*. It is evident that early Bonpo authors took the first two words from this title to form its short title, *mDo 'dus,* by which it is known today. It is a common practice among Tibetan writers not to use the full title when referencing a work, but to use a short title instead. This is the reason why the full title cannot be found when the *mDo 'dus* is referenced in other sources. It is not yet certain when the Bonpos started to use this short title. It is a very laborious process to check all the Bon sources available from the 11th century onwards, just to find out whether this short title is used in any of them. Besides, it is difficult to gain access to many of the early Bon materials. I have read nearly two dozen Bon texts, mostly historical, biographical and commentaries of doctrinal texts, written by Bonpo scholars from the late 11th century onwards; but there may well be more texts, which have escaped my attention.

The earliest source I could find that provides the short title of the *mDo 'dus* is a 12th-century biography of Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106), written by his student Paton Osal Gyaltsen (c. 11–12th century). In this source (Paton 1998, p. 10), the author not only provides the title of the *mDo 'dus*, but also the short title of the *gZer mig* (Paton 1998, p. 8, 13). This confirms the existence of these texts from that period and also that they were apparently known by their abbreviated titles. Apart from this, there is a quotation from the *mDo 'dus* in a text that is said to have been written by Shenton Namkha Gyaltsen (1088–1163; Shenton 2002, p. 51). However, there seems to be a problem regarding the date of Shenton's text. This text also contains a quote from a work by Gaton Tsultrim Gyaltsen (c. 13th

century) and Gaton's work obviously cannot be dated before the 12th century AD. This suggests that Shenton's text may indeed be from a later period, but for an unknown reason it has still been attributed to Shenton Namkha Gyaltsen (1088–1163). There is an almost identical work that is attributed to a student of Gaton Tsultrim Gyaltsen named Gyaltsen Chogleg (see Bon *bKa' brten* volume 82.1).

Furthermore, several other Bonpo scholars from the late 13th century onwards have reported the existence of the *mDo 'dus* in their works, such as in the *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo* (p. 492), in the *Theg rim gyi rnam bshad gsal ba'i me long* (Gaton 1998, p. 20, 21, 25, 26, and 30),[62] and in the *rGyal rabs bon gyi byung gnas* (Khyungpo 1915, p. 2, 3, 7, 10, 19, 32, and 33). Some passages, probably from the *mDo 'dus*, are also found in the *rTsa rgyud nyi sgron* (p. 38ff)[63] and in the commentary of *Yang rtse klong chen* (Tagtsha 1973, pp. 4-16),[64] but their authors do not give its title.

TWO CARETAKERS OR THREE ĀCĀRYAS

Many Bonpo scholars assume that the two caretakers, who are also known as two *ācāryas* or two Buddhist monks,[65] are different from the three *ācāryas* who are known for discovering the earliest Bon texts in the early 10th century AD. However, this seems to be a result of how the Bonpos remember the same group

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[62] Gaton informs us that the *mDo 'dus* contains 25 chapters (Gaton 1998, p. 26). Some passages from the *sGrub thabs mdo* and the *gZer mig* are also cited in this source.

[63] This text is mentioned in the *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo* and may thus be datable before 1310. According to the colophon, Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen was the fifth generation to receive transmission of this text. For a brief history of this text, see Karmay 1972, p. 173.

[64] This commentary has no colophon. From the list of names of those (Tagtsha 1973, p. 81-82) by whom the root text, the *Yangs rtse klong chen*, was transmitted, the author Tagtsha Lama Gyaltsen wrote that he received the transmission from Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen. Thus, the author must have lived around the 15th-century. The root text was said to be discovered by *bzhod ston* Ngodub Dagbar in 1088 AD.

[65] In his catalogue of Bon *bKa' 'gyur*, Kungrol Dragpa identified the two caretakers as Buddhist monks while Nyima Tenzin identified them as two *ācāryas* in his Chronology (Nyima Tenzin 1965a).

of people in different contexts, and in different periods of time. As mentioned above, the two caretakers of the Samye Temple, Tregyal Ratsa and Segu Rinchen Dakpa, are remembered for the discovery of the four sūtras. These two names might actually have been constructed from the names of three *ācāryas*. Therefore, it is worth discussing to some extent the possible origins of the names of the two caretakers. In order to explain the manner of construction, I will compare the names of the two caretakers with the names of those three Nepalese *ācāryas*, and try to answer whether each name really belongs to one person, as presumed in the above-mentioned sources, or is it the collective name of three persons (e.g. the three ācāryas).

The name of the first caretaker Tregyal Ratsa (Tib. *tre rgyal ra tsa*) occurs with at least four different spellings: *tre rgya gar ra tsa* in the *sGrub thabs mdo* (p. 537), *tre rgyal ra tsa* in Gaton's *gTer gyi kha byang* (Gaton 2005, p. 50), *tri rgya ka ra dza* in Patsun's history (Patsun 1991, p. 233), and *dre rgya ra tsa* in Kundrol Dragpa's catalogue (Kundrol 1993, p. 102). Since the name *tre rgya gar ra tsa* that occurs in the *sGrub thabs mdo* is the earliest version of the first caretaker's name, I shall discuss this name, by examining its description more closely.

I shall separate this name into three parts: *tre*, *rgya gar* and *ra tsa*. The word *tre* could be read as Sanskrit *tri*, 'three', which is supported by Patsun's reading, mentioned above. The words *rgya gar* refer to India, and *ra tsa*, which is alternatively written *ra dza,* are versions of the Sanskrit word *rāja*, 'king'. Based on this reading, the name *tre rgya gar ra tsa* could be translated as 'three Indian kings.' However, the third word *ra tsa* does not seem applicable, because none of these names were associated with a king. Therefore, I shall propose another possibility for the last part of the name.

It is possible that the last word *ra tsa* is a scribal mistake for *a tsa ra* (Tibetan transcription of Skt. *ācārya*). If I may replace the *ra tsa* with *a tsa ra*, the correct spelling should thus be *tri rgya gar a tsa ra*, which means 'three Indian *ācārya*s.' Therefore, the name of the first caretaker, Tregyal Ratsa, is possibly

derived from a collective name of the three ācāryas. This suggests that this name does not really belong to one person, as is assumed in the later Bonpo sources.

The name of the second caretaker, Segu Rinchen Dakpa (Tib. *sad gu rin chen grags pa*), does belong to one person, but it is possibly derived from the name Seku Ratna (Tib. *sad ku ratna*), one of those three ācāryas. The word *sad ku* is interchangeable with *sad gu* in Tibetan (Gaton 2005, pp. 50–51). I could not figure out the etymology, meaning and the original linguistic background of the word *sad gu*.[66] Early Bonpo scholars probably left this word without translating it into Tibetan for the same reason. The second word, *ratna*, is a Sanskrit word and can be translated into Tibetan as *rin chen*. This suggests that Segu Rinchen Dakpa is no other than Seku Ratna, even though Bonpos usually identify them as two different persons.

CONCLUSION

The *mDo 'dus* has many resemblances to the legend of the Buddha. This will be argued in detail in chapter four of this dissertation. To estimate the date of the creation of the *mDo 'dus*, I have looked at its colophon, narratives relating to its discovery, and extant quotations from, and references to, this text from other Bon sources. The colophon does not help us to settle the date, as it seems to be merely a traditional claim rather than a historical account. The first claim, its attribution to Shenrab Miwo, is not justifiable because even the historical existence of Shenrab yet remains to be proven. The second claim, that the *mDo 'dus* to was translated by *snya* Lishu Tagring from the language of the eternal god (Tib. *g.yung drung lha'i skad*), is also not convincing because of the following two reasons: the language of the original text is hard to identify and the existence of the translator has not been historically validated. Besides, there is no physical evidence that support the

[66] Cf. alternative reading *pang ku*, *supra*, in footnote 60. There is a possibility that this word *sad gu* is derived from the Sanskrit word *sad gu ru* 'a good teacher' omitting the last part *ru* in Tibetan, but this still requires further investigation. I am grateful to Jonathan Silk for pointing out this possibility.

existence of any Bon text prior to the early 10th century. However, in regard to the source language of the *mDo* 'dus, it is possible that the early Bonpos were actually referring to Sanskrit as the eternal divine language. It is also possible that the association of this eternal divine language with the *mDo 'dus* could have derived from a part of its title. Since the *mDo 'dus* was received as *g.Yung drung lha'i bon mdo* 'eternal divine Bon teaching,' the Bonpos may have assumed that the *mDo 'dus* was translated from the 'eternal divine language.'

Since the traditional claims of dating the *mDo 'dus* before 10th century are doubtful, I moved to the next option, of investigating the narrative of discovery of the *mDo 'dus*. The discovery of the *mDo 'dus* has become impossible to describe without mentioning the four sūtras and in particular identifying the first of the four sūtras. Based on the lists provided in early Bon texts, including two of these four sūtras, the *gZer mig*, and a Bon Prajñāpāramitā text, we know that as early as the 12th century the four sūtras were labelled together as one collection. These four are said to have been discovered by two caretakers in the red stūpa in the Samye temple, in the Iron-bird year.

Nyima Tenzin (1965, p. 3) estimated that year to be 961 AD, while Lhagyal argues for 1021 AD. However, there are chronological problems with some events described in Gaton's history, which makes these dates appear unacceptable to me. The meeting of the two caretakers and Tirgyi Uton would not have been possible before the latter's teacher Zhuye's birth in 1002 AD; the conversation about the discovery of Shenchen Luga (996–1035 AD) is not possible before the actual discovery took place in 1017 AD; and the second meeting of two caretakers and Sumpa Taton (student of Lhari Nyenpo, 1024–1091 AD) is impossible before the mid 11th century. Therefore, I propose the first possible date to be 1081 AD, the next Iron-bird year after 1021 AD. However, examining a unique passage in Gaton's history (Gaton 2005) — the actual discovery was not in the Iron-bird year, but forty-nine years later — we can determine another date, i.e. 1070 AD, by adding forty-nine years to 1021 AD. Since rMe'u Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106)

has mentioned the four sūtras in his work, adding forty-nine years to 1081 AD, resulting in a date of 1130 AD, would be too late for the discovery of the sūtras. This leaves us with only two possible dates: 1070 AD or 1081 AD. Although, I could not establish which of these two dates is correct, in my opinion it is at least safe to conclude that the discovery of the four sūtras must have taken place in the second half of the 11th century.

No text is available today with the actual title *Ḥbyung khungs mdo*, thus we cannot be sure what the first of the four sūtras really was. On the basis of its content and its title, Bonpo authors identified it either as the *mDo 'dus* or the *gZer mig*. The early sources either remain unclear about the existence of the *mDo 'dus*, or they identify the *gZer mig* as the first of the four sūtras. It was in the 13th-century text by Gaton that the *mDo 'dus* implicitly became secured among the four sūtras, although he did not confirm that the *mDo 'dus* was the first sūtra. This was made more explicit later by the 15th-century Bonpo historian Patsun, who discussed the discovery of the four sūtras in great detail, closely following Gaton. Patsun not only secured or confirmed the position of the *mDo 'dus* among the four sūtras, but he also influenced the understanding of the history of the *mDo 'dus* of later, 18th-century Bonpo scholars (such as, Kundrol Dakpa and Nyima Tenzin). Like Kundrol Dakpa and Nyima Tenzin, most contemporary Bonpo scholars also regard the *mDo 'dus* as the first of the four sūtras, the *Ḥbyung khungs mdo*, and believe that it was discovered in the red stūpa in Samye, in the Iron-bird year.

If we consider the *mDo 'dus* to be the first of the four sūtras and also believe that the latter were discovered in the second half of the 11th century, then we should conclude that the *mDo 'dus* was also discovered in the second half of the 11th century — that is, I would argue, most likely 1070 or 1081 AD — in that red stūpa in Samye. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that passages from this source are already quoted in sources that date from the 12th century AD (cf. Paton 1998, Shenton 2002). By then it was already known by its short title, the *mDo 'dus*.