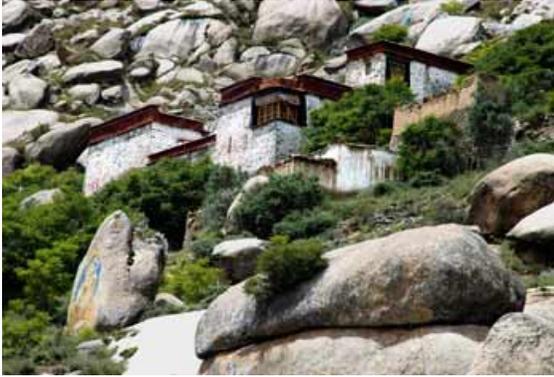


Drakri Hermitage (*Brag ri ri khrod*)



A view of Drakri Hermitage (Brag ri ri khrod) from below.

Location and Layout

The word *brag ri* means “crag” or “gorge.” As is the case with many hermitages (*ri khrod*), it is difficult to know whether the site got its name from the *bla ma* who founded it, or whether the founding *bla ma* got his name from the site that he used for retreat. The *bla ma* incarnation lineage that owned this hermitage is also (perhaps even more commonly) known as Sba ri rather than Brag ri. And even the hermitage often goes by the name of Bari Hermitage (*sba ri ri khrod*).¹

The monastery lies about three kilometers north and slightly east of downtown Lha sa on the [side of a mountain](#) above the southernmost section of the suburb of [Nyang bran](#). Brag ri is therefore the closest to downtown Lha sa of all of Se ra’s hermitages.

As one begins to walk up the hill on the path to the hermitage from the residential portion of Nyang bran, one first encounters several large boulders with [images of Gu ru rin po che](#) (eighth century) and other Rnying ma deities painted on their surface. Since the monastery became a Rnying ma hermitage only since its renovation in the 1990s, these rock-paintings are almost certainly of recent provenance.

¹ The *Extensive Explanation of the World* (*’Dzam gling rgyas bshad*) mentions two Drakri hermitages. One it calls “new” (*gsar*), and the other “old” (*rnying*); see Turrell Wylie, *The Geography of Tibet According to the ’Dzam-gling-rgyas-bshad* (Rome: IsMEO, 1962), 83.



The courtyard of the main temple compound. The temple is on the right, and the kitchen on the left.

The hermitage itself consists of five major sections:

- The **main temple compound** contained several buildings, all around a central courtyard: the **temple**, a **kitchen**, a wing of **monks' living quarters**. It also contains a large mani wheel (*ma ni 'khor lo*). This entire compound has been renovated, although the present buildings have fewer stories than did the original ones.
- A **large complex** built in terraced fashion located just below (south of) the main temple compound. Before 1959 this tiered complex contained stables (at its lowest portion), and work/meeting rooms and the living quarters of the workers and business managers of the Drakri Lama's estate (*brag ri bla brang*) on the upper tiers. This entire complex is in ruins today.
- A **building** that before 1959 served as the living quarters for the eight fully ordained monks who formed the ritual core of the monastic community. It lies southwest of the temple complex. Today, only the foundations of this building remain.
- A **stable** for *mdzo*, a yak-cow hybrid.
- **Several huts**. Although at least two such huts exist today (inhabited by nuns), it is not clear whether these structures existed at all prior to 1959.

In 2004, the renovations in the **interior of the main temple** were not quite finished. All of the images in the temple are new. There are **statues** of the Buddha, of Gu ru rin po che in various forms, and of several tantric deities. There is also a three-dimensional model of Gu ru rin po che's celestial palace, the **Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain (Zangs mdog dpal ri)**. One entire wall is filled with **pressed-clay tablets (tsa tsa)** on shelves.



The interior of the main temple.

The four tantric priests (*sngags pa*) that reside at Brag ri live in the residential portion of the main temple compound. The two nuns live in huts to the southeast and southwest of the main compound.

History

One source² tells us that Brag ri was used as a meditational retreat by Klong rdol bla ma ngag dbang blo bzang (1719-1794),³ one of the most renowned and beloved scholar-*yogis* of the [Lhopa Regional House \(Lho pa khang tshan\)](#) of the Jé College (Grwa tshang byes). But the official founder is usually reckoned to be the famous abbot of Pha bong kha, Pha bong kha rgya mtsho mtha' yas (b. eighteenth century).⁴ This figure is also considered to be the first incarnation in the Brag ri or “Sba ri” incarnation lineage. The Bari Lama’s estate (Sba ri bla brang), therefore, owned the hermitage up to 1959. The hermitage had indirect ties to the Jé College of Se ra through Sba ri rin po che’s affiliation with the [Tsa Regional House \(Tsha khang tshan\)](#) of the Jé College. In the absence of any historical documentation – like a “catalogue” (*dkar chag*) of the monastery – we can say little more than this about the hermitage’s history. Drakri Hermitage became the mother monastery of [Garu Nunnery \(Ga ru dgon pa\)](#) perhaps as early as the time of its founding – that is, at the time of the first Sba ri bla ma, Rgya mtsho mtha' yas. The Sba ri bla mas

² Ser smad spom ra dge bshes ye shes dbang phyug, *Ser smad thos bsam nor gling grwa tshang gi chos 'byung lo rgyus nor bu 'i phreng ba* [A History of the Sermé Tösam Norling College: A Garland of Jewels] (Bylakuppe: Sermey Printing Press, 1984), 36.

³ See TBRC [P22](#).

⁴ Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* [The Great Dungkar Dictionary] (Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2002), 1501. See also TBRC [P1723](#). Bshes gnyen tshul khrims, *Lha sa 'i dgon tho rin chen spungs rgyan* [A Catalogue of the Monasteries of Lhasa: A Heap of Jewels] (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2001), 73, mentions another figure in addition to Rgya mtsho mtha' yas as a possible founder, to wit, the Drakri incarnation Lozang Tekchok Wangpo (Brag ri sprul sku blo bzang theg mchog dbang po).

supervised the training of the Ga ru nuns until 1959. We know, for example, that the Sba ri bla ma would make at least one trip annually to Garu Nunnery to perform memorization exams for the nuns.

In 1959 the monks of the hermitage were evicted and the hermitage was converted into a prison. The prison had a reputation for being one of the most severe penal institutions in the Lha sa area. After other prisons in Lha sa were expanded, Sba ri was no longer needed for this purpose and it was eventually abandoned.



The Rnying ma bla ma who rebuilt the hermitage sits in the main temple, engaged in prayer.

In the 1980s a Rnying ma *bla ma* from an outlying area who had been living in Lha sa was searching for a site on which to build a temple and a “Nyingma practice center” (*rnying ma sgrub grwa*). He wanted to do this chiefly in memory of his mother, who was a renowned doctor and who had passed away not long before. He heard about Drakri Hermitage and began to explore the possibility of transforming the abandoned Dge lugs hermitage into his Nyingma practice center. The first step was to obtain permission from the relevant authorities in the Lha sa municipal government. Having acquired the requisite permits, he hired workers to begin cleaning the site, to repair broken walls, and so forth. After the work had begun, however, a former official of the Bari Lama’s estate, who lived in the neighboring Nyang bran, began to object, arguing that it was inappropriate for a Dge lugs monastery to be converted into a Nyingma practice center. The Rnying ma *bla ma* then approached the former Sba ri official directly and told him that he was willing to give him the hermitage – to turn the site over to him completely – if he was willing to take on responsibility for renovating it. The former Bari Lama’s estate official replied that he lacked the funds to assume such a responsibility. Rather than seeing the hermitage collapse, the Rnying ma *bla ma* decided to continue the work he had already begun, but he tells visitors who know about the contentious recent history of the site that it has never been his intention to simply take possession of Brag ri. Instead, he says, he conceives of himself as a kind of

steward, and he insists that if and when [the present Sba ri rin po che](#) ever comes back to Tibet (he left for India in 1983), he would be happy to return the hermitage to him. We mention this controversy simply because it gives one a small glimpse of the mechanics and politics of monastery renovation, and of the role that intersectarian rivalry can play in this regard.