

Pabongkha Hermitage (Pha bong kha ri khrod)



A view of Pha bong kha from the south.



A view of Pha bong kha from the rear, looking down into the Nyang bran Valley.

Introduction

Pha bong kha, one of the largest and most important of the Se ra hermitages (*ri khrod*), lies about eight kilometers northwest of downtown Lha sa on the southern (Lha sa-facing) slope of a peak known as Mount Parasol (Dbu gdugs ri), northwest of Se ra.¹ It takes a little over one hour to walk from Pha bong kha to Se ra. Pha

¹ The account that follows is based on the narrative of the monastery in Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Dga' ldan chos 'byung bai dūrya ser po* [*Yellow Lapis: A History of the Ganden (School)*] (Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1991), 144; on the “Pha bong kha” entry in Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 2002), 1313-1316; on a *dkar chag* of the monastery made available to me by Pha bong kha monks in 2004; and on material from oral interviews with some of the resident monks conducted in August of 2004.

The title of the *dkar chag* reads *Yul nyer bzhi 'i ya rgyal/ de bi ko ṭi dang ming gzhan pha bong kha byang chub shing gi nags khrod du bkod pa 'i dkar chag dad ldan padmo rgyas byed gzi sbyin 'od stong 'bar ba 'i nor bu* (hereafter *Pha bong kha 'i dkar chag*). It appears to be an edited version of a text bearing the same name published in *Three Khrid on the Nā ro mkha' spyod Practice* (Delhi: Ngawang Sopa, 1976), 454-532. (I have Gene Smith to thank for making a copy of this latter edition available to me.) References to the *dkar chag* in this work are to the edition published in Tibet. The publication of the Tibetan edition of the *dkar chag* was sponsored by a contemporary abbot (or perhaps now former abbot) of Pha bong kha, Byams pa thub bstan rin po che.

In the colophon the author of the *dkar chag* identifies himself as the reincarnation of a *bla ma* of Kong po jo rdzong, the reincarnation of the *bla ma* of Chökhang Tsewa Monastery (Chos khang rtse ba dgon pa); he also identifies himself as belonging to the Mé College (Grwa tshang smad) of Se ra, but gives his name only in Sanskrit as Wāḡiṇḍamatibhadrapaṭu bandashāsadharasagara (sic).

bong kha is the starting point for the “Sixth-Month Fourth-Day” (*drug pa tshe bzhi*) Sera Mountain Circumambulation Circuit (*se ra’i ri ’khor*) pilgrimage. To see images of the circumambulation taken in 2002, click [here](#).

The site has a long history that is said to go back to the time of the first Buddhist king (of Tibet) Songtsen Gampo (Chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po).² Although originally the site of his castle (*sku mkhar*) or fort, it appears that Pha bong kha was quickly converted into a monastery, perhaps as early as the reign of the second great Buddhist king (of Tibet) Trisong Detsen (Chos rgyal khri srong lde’u btsan). The monastery was partially destroyed as part of King Glang dar ma’s (d. 842) campaign to dismantle monastic Buddhism. During the so-called “later propagation period” (*phyi dar*), Pha bong kha was taken over by members of the Bka’ gdams pa school. Later, Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) lived at the site as a hermit, and it eventually became a Dge lugs institution. Before 1959, Pha bong kha was apparently an autonomous institution that belonged to no other monastery, although at various times it has had informal ties to Se ra through the person of the various Se ra *bla mas* that served as its abbots. The monastery suffered considerable destruction from 1960 to the mid-1980s. Se ra monks began renovating the buildings in the mid-1980s, and today the monastery belongs to Se ra. Since the mid-80s, all of Pha bong kha’s monks are Se ra monks, and the hermitage is managed by a senior

The introductory verse of the Delhi edition bears identifying marks (dots) under certain syllables. (These are missing in the Tibetan edition.) Those marks spell out “Ngag dbang blo bzang thub bstan rgya mtsho ’jigs bral dbang phyug phyogs las rnam par rgyal ba.” This resembles the name of the eighth Demo incarnation Ngawang Lozang Tupten Jikmé Gyatso (De mo sku phreng brgyad pa ngag dbang blo bzang thub bstan ’jigs med rgya mtsho, 1778-1819), tutor of the Ninth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng dgu pa, 1806-1815).

The colophon tells us that the work was written between the female-fire-pig (*me mo phag*) and male-earth-bird (*sa pho bya*) years. In the fourteenth calendrical cycle or *rab byung*, this corresponds to 1827-1828. The author of the *dkar chag* further states that he based his work on a verse text compiled by Mkhār rdo ba (*mkhan thog brgyad pa kha rdo sku thog bzod pa rgya mtsho’am/ blo bzang sgom chung pas bsgrigs pa tshig bcad ma*), as well as on the constitution (*bca’ yig*) of the monastery written by Rta tshag ye shes bstan pa’i mgon po (1760-1810). On Mkhār rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho (1672-1749) see the [Introduction to the Hermitages](#). On Rta tshag ye shes bstan pa’i mgon po, see TBRC [P302](#).

Still unavailable, to my knowledge, are: (1) the *dkar chag* of Pha bong kha in six folios written by Mkhār rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho, and (2) another *dkar chag* by ’Khon ston dpal ’byor lhun grub (1561-1637). The latter is mentioned in A khu rin po che’s (1803-1875) list of rare texts; see Lokesh Chandra, *Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1981, repr. of the 1963 ed.), no. 11012. Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa’i dgon tho rin chen spungs rgyan* [*A Catalogue of the Monasteries of Lhasa: A Heap of Jewels*; hereafter *Lha sa’i dgon tho*] (Bod jongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2001), 15, quotes ’Khon ston’s *dkar chag*, implying, perhaps, that he had the text at his disposal; he gives the date of composition of the work as 1619.

Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho’s account of Pha bong kha in the *Bai dūrya ser po*, 144, is fascinating because it links the flourishing of Tibet to the flourishing of Pha bong kha; and vice versa, it links political problems in Tibet with the decline of Pha bong kha. Mention of Pha bong kha is also found in Turrell Wylie, *The Geography of Tibet According to the ’Dzam-gling-rgyas-bshad* (Rome: IsMEO, 1962), 83 and 159 n. 400; and Alfonsa Ferrari, Luciano Petech and Hugh Richardson, *Mk’yen brtse’s Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet* (Rome: IsMEO, 1958), 42, 101-102 n. 86, and plates 6 and 7.

² Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 15, gives the date of Pha bong kha’s founding as “around 643” but cites no source for this.

Se ra monk. As was the case before 1959, and as is typical of the Se ra hermitages in general, Pha bong kha is principally a ritual institution. It maintains its own tradition of monthly and yearly ritual cycles.³ The most important of these yearly ritual events (at least for the laity) are:

- the six-day (three sets of two-day) Avalokiteśvara fasting rituals (*smying gnas*) that take place during the time of the Tibetan New Year (Lo gsar) celebrations,
- the sixteen-day (eight sets of two-day) Avalokiteśvara fasting rituals that take place during the fourth Tibetan month. This attracts many (especially elderly) people from Lha sa and the surrounding area, and
- the ritual and other events that take place during the “Sixth-Month Fourth-Day” pilgrimage.

Location and Layout

Various kinds of rhetoric have been used to portray Pha bong kha as a sacred site – metaphysical, historical, archival, and so forth. In the more metaphysical accounts, Pha bong kha is depicted as a site that is sacred *by its very nature* – that is, sacred by virtue of the fact that from among the twenty-eight sites in the world associated with the deity Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog), Pha bong kha is one of the Four Principal Sites (Nye ba’i gnas bzhi): “the one called Debikoṭi (De bi ko ṭi).”⁴ In these accounts, then, Pha bong kha is depicted as sacred at a deep or ontological level because it is a part of the body of a deity, Cakrasaṃvara.

But other discourses on the sacredness of the site exist alongside the metaphysical one. As is typical of many Tibetan religious institutions, various auspicious self-arisen images (*rang byon*)⁵ and rock formations are believed to exist on the mountains behind Pha bong kha. The parasol has already been mentioned in other contexts; there is also a famous rock formation that resembles a conch. These various magical properties of the landscape are considered signs of the “purity of the site” (*sa shyang*). [Click [here](#) to read a discussion of the metaphysics of sacred space at a site like Se ra.]

³ As with many monasteries, these include both exoteric and Tantric ritual practices that take place on the eighth, tenth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, and twenty-eighth of the lunar month. Pha bong kha monks also do special rituals for important *bla mas* in the tradition every Wednesday.

⁴ *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 15b-16a; the author of this text, 57b, gives the Tibetan translation of this as Lha mo khar.

⁵ For an account of other features of the surrounding landscape and various kinds self-arisen images found at or near the site, many of which are said to date to the time that Srong btsan sgam po and his two queens lived at the Pha bong kha, see *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 22af and 29bf. This section of the text also contains a description of the special qualities of the plants and wildlife in the area.



The “white conch shell” rock formation, one of the signs of holiness visible in the mountains above Pha bong kha.

Pha bong kha is located on a rise above the fields in the Lha sa suburb of Nyang bran. Just east of the monastery is a [cemetery \(dur khrod\)](#) that is in use even to this day. The cemetery is identified as one of the cemeteries in the *maṅḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara. Informants report that before 1959 only fully ordained monks could be brought here for “sky burial.” Today no such restriction exists, and the bodies of lay people are also disposed of here. Inside the main temple at Pha bong kha there is a small [stone statue of a Buddha](#)⁶ said to have magically emerged self-arisen image out of a stone as Srong btsan sgam po was gestating in his mother’s womb. By the time the king was born, the statue, which was slowly emerging from the stone over the nine months he was in his mother’s womb, took its final and present form. The image faces the cemetery, and – like the [Maitreya statue at Keutsang Hermitage \(Ke’u tshang ri khrod\)](#) that gazes down upon the eastern cemetery of Lha sa – this statue too is said to effectuate the “transition of consciousness” (*’pho ba*) to the pure land for any deceased person whose remains are brought to this cemetery.

⁶ This statue has been variously identified by different sources and informants as Avalokiteśvara, Śākyamuni in his kingly or *jo bo* form, Amitāyus and Amitābha. *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 28a, states that the image is of Amitābha. The same text (26b-27a) also cites *The Compendium on the Mañi [Mantra] (Ma ni bka’ ’bum)* concerning the tradition that an image emerged from a stone as Srong btsan sgam po was gestating in his mother’s womb. A believer would see this as proof of the authenticity of the image housed at Pha bong kha. A skeptic would see in this an attempt to read events of classical Tibetan mythography into the artistic landscape of Pha bong kha.



The self-arisen image of the Buddha housed in the Pha bong kha temple. It emerged from a rock slowly as Srong btsan sgam po was gestating in his mother's womb.

The first temple that one sees as one arrives at Pha bong kha is the [Temple of the Three Protectors \(Rigs gsum mgon po lha khang\)](#). The temple that presently exists at this site is recent. Before 1959, it seems that only a small shrine to the Three Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po) existed at this spot.⁷ The [present temple](#) was built sometime in the late 1980s. In 2004 it was being renovated, and new [murals](#) depicting the Eighty Deeds of Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha brgyad bcu*) were being painted on its walls by a group of artists from Gtsang province. The temple contains several important icons:

- In the center portion of the main altar one finds the stone self-arisen images of the Three Protectors – [Avalokiteśvara](#), [Mañjuśrī](#), and [Vajrapāṇi](#).
- On the western portion of the main altar – the left side as one is facing it – there is a miraculous statue of [Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara](#), which is said to grow slightly in size every time the yearly fasting ritual of the deity is performed in this temple.
- Along the eastern wall of the temple, one finds the famous stone containing the [six-syllable mantra](#) (*oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*) that was carved into (or that

⁷ The cult of the Three Protectors at Pha bong kha goes back at least to the seventeenth century. For example, in a vision that he had when he was forty-three years old, the Fifth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa) is told by Avalokiteśvara that “In Central Tibet, people must recite the six-syllable *mantra* (*sngags*) 100,000,000 times and in Pha bong kha the ritual method of realization (*sgrub thabs*) of the three divinities, namely Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi must be established”; Samten Gyeltsen Karmay, *The Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama: The Gold Manuscript in the Fournier Collection* (London: Serindia Publications, 1988), 44.

emerged miraculously from) the rock onto which Thon mi (seventh century), the legendary founder of the Tibetan written language, wrote these letters as the first exemplar of Tibetan writing.

Proceeding northwest from the Temple of the Three Protectors, one arrives at what is arguably the most important structure in the monastery: the temple called [The Boulder House \(Pha bong kha\)](#). Known originally as Maru Castle (Sku mkhar ma ru), it sits atop the largest boulder on the site, the so-called “Female Turtle” (Rus sbal mo) Boulder (see below). The castle – reportedly the first structure built on this site – is said to date from the time of Srong btsan sgam po. It is not clear, however, whether the present temple is (or contains) a remnant of that original building, or whether the castle was completely destroyed and later rebuilt as the temple that exists there today.



The Pha bong kha Temple, purportedly the oldest temple at the hermitage, sits atop the Female Turtle Boulder. At the bottom of the boulder (in the center) one can see the small door that leads into Srong btsan sgam po’s meditation cave (sgrub phug).

One enters this temple building from the north side. The first floor is little more than a vestibule containing stairs that lead to the second story. Ascending the flight of stairs, one arrives at the three chapels that together comprise the second floor:

- A small chapel that houses statues of some of the more important figures in the history of the monastery
- The large [assembly hall \(’du khang\)](#) has room for about one-hundred monks. This is the main meeting hall used by the monks of the monastery today. In a small case on the eastern side of this room, facing the windows overlooking the cemetery, one finds the [self-arisen image of the Buddha](#) that emerged from a stone during Srong btsan sgam po’s gestation.
- Behind the main assembly hall is a small [protector deity chapel \(mgon khang\)](#).

The third floor contains the [private rooms of the lama](#).

Beneath the main temple, in the interior of this boulder is a [cave chapel](#), the place where Srong btsan sgam po remained in retreat in order to pacify the negative forces that were hindering the building of the [Jo khang](#). There is a [mortar throne](#) in the middle of the room that is said to be Srong btsan sgam po's actual meditation seat. The altar along the northern wall of this cave contains a self-arisen image rock image of the deity [Dpal lha mo](#), who appeared in a vision to the king while he was in retreat here.

[Tsong kha pa's meditation hut](#) lies just north of the Pha bong kha main temple. Tsong kha pa is said to have stayed here when he once took the one-day Mahāyāna Precepts (*theg chen gso sbyong*). Beside Tsong kha pa's hut is a [small chapel](#) containing a self-arisen image stone image of the Medicine Buddha (*Sman bla*).

North of Tsong kha pa's meditation hut are a series of [stūpas](#) that are said to date to the time that the site was a Bka' gdams pa monastery. And north of *these* is the [Temple of the Five Visions](#), which contains two chapels:

- A small [Chapel to the Eight Medicine Buddhas](#) (*Sman bla bde gshegs brgyad*), and
- A large [Chapel to Tsong kha pa](#). This chapel has large clay statues of Tsong kha pa and his two disciples, as well as statues of Tsong kha pa in various forms as he appeared in visions to his disciple Mkhas grub rje (1385-1438). This set of images of Tsong kha pa is collectively known as the "Five Visions of the Lord (Tsongkhapa)" (*rje gzigs pa lnga ldan*).

Northeast of the Temple of the Five Visions of the Lord (Tsongkhapa) is the [Male Turtle \(Rus sbal pho\) Boulder](#) (see below) with a [small structure](#) atop it. Before 1959, there was a *stūpa* where this small structure now stands.

Finally, to the east of the Male Turtle Boulder are the ruins of what used to be the headquarters of the [estate of Lhaptün Rinpoché \(Lha btsun rin po che'i bla brang\)](#).

In addition to the buildings just mentioned there are many other buildings, like the [kitchen](#), as well as minor structures and shrines, and of course various large buildings that contain [monastic living quarters](#).



In the foreground, the (white) meditation hut of Tsong kha pa. Behind it are the stūpas that are said to date to the time that Pha bong kha was a Bka' gdams pa institution. Behind the stūpas is the Temple of the Five Visions of the Lord (Tsongkhapa).

History

Founding Narratives

Pha bong kha, also known as Maru Castle, has a history that spans more than thirteen-hundred years. Traditional accounts tell us that the oldest building on the site, the temple known as Pha bong kha (“Boulder House/Man”),⁸ predates the Jo khang, Lha sa’s central cathedral. If this is true – and carbon-14 dating may prove definitive in deciding this, as it has in helping us to fix the date of the interior portions of the Jo khang itself – it would make the main temple at Pha bong kha one of the oldest Buddhist monuments in the Tibetan world, dating to seventh century.

There are two distinct narratives of the founding of Pha bong kha. The first relates the founding of the hermitage to the building of the Jo khang. The second relates it to the figure of Thon mi, the legendary founder of the Tibetan writing system and literary language. In each case, the founding of the monastery is associated with foundational events in the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. In both narratives, the turtle spirit, who resides within the giant boulder at the site, is seen as something to be controlled or dominated. But in the second account, it is portrayed as something wondrous rather than as a threat. In neither of these narratives is the turtle gendered, as it will be in the later apocalyptic myths of the Pha bong kha site (see below).

Version One⁹

According to many Tibetan sources, the Jo khang – the central cathedral of Lha sa and the first Buddhist temple built in Tibet – is said to have been constructed to house the statue of the Jo bo mi bskyod rdo rje, brought to Tibet by Srong btsan sgam po’s Nepalese queen. But the building of the Jo khang was no easy thing. The site where the temple was supposed to sit was a swamp or lake (*mtsho*), and the water of this lake was the heart’s-blood (*snying khrag*) of the female demon that lay supine over (or in some accounts that actually *was*) the landscape of Tibet. The demoness, we are told, had to be subjugated if Buddhism was to thrive in the country.¹⁰ And so, the narrative continues, Srong btsan sgam po ordered that the area be filled with dirt. The dirt was carried on the backs of goats.¹¹ Once the site

⁸ One might image two quite different etymologies of the word “Pha bong kha.” The word might be (1) a corruption of *pha bong khang*, “The house (on) the Boulder”; or (2) a more euphonious form of the word *pha bong pa*, “The Man from the (Site of) the Boulder.” In the first instance, it is the architecture that gives the site its name. In the second instance, it is the first inhabitant.

⁹ The following account is based principally on *Dung dkar tshig mdzod* [*Dungkar Dictionary*], but see also the version found in *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 206f, which varies insignificantly.

¹⁰ The legend and symbolism of the supine demoness has been discussed by Janet Gyatso in “Down with the Demoness: Reflection on a Feminine Ground in Tibet,” in Janice Willis, ed., *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1987).

¹¹ The original name of Lha sa was Ra sa, that is, “Goat Earth.” There are many legends related to goats in Lha sa – from the Great Female Goat [Temple] (Ra mo che) to the statue of the goat inside the Jo khang itself.

had been prepared, construction on the Jo khang began. But the portion of the walls that went up by day would be destroyed by demons at night. The Nepalese queen asked her co-wife, the Chinese queen, to perform an astrological prognostication to determine how to deal with this problem. The Chinese queen determined that an earth spirit, a golden turtle named Gser ma hā,¹² who lived in the northern mountains of the Lha sa Valley, was the cause of the problem.¹³ She recommended that the king build a fortress at the site: an edifice that, being placed atop the huge turtle-boulder, would subdue the spirit beneath it, thus clearing away the obstacles that were impeding the building of the Jo khang temple.



The interior of Srong btsan sgam po's meditation cave located in the Female Turtle Boulder. The throne is said to have been Srong btsan sgam po's actual meditation seat.

Srong btsan sgam po then built a nine-story fort made of bricks mortared with molten metal on the “back” of the Female Turtle Boulder.¹⁴ It was fastened to the boulder in each of the four directions with powerful, magically-blessed chains. He and his two wives then set themselves to meditating in this building for a period of three years. According to an alternate tradition, Srong btsan sgam po meditated not in the castle but in a cave inside the huge boulder: a cave that has been preserved

¹² *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 21b: *sa bdag gser ma hA gser gyi rus sbal gyi dbyibs*.

¹³ Such a turtle is mentioned in other historical works. For example, the *The Clear Mirror: A Royal History (Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long)* states that “in the north at Pha bong kha in Nyang bran there is a black turtle”; Sa skya pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan, *The Clear Mirror: A Traditional Account of Tibet's Golden Age*, transl. by McComas Taylor and Lama Choedak Yuthok (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1996), 165. On the relationship of turtle spirits to divination, see R. A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 209-210.

¹⁴ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 15, quotes 'Khon ston's *dkar chag* to the effect that Maru Castle was built by Srong btsan sgam po “when he was fifteen years old in the female-water-hare (*chu mo yos*) year,” and that he began meditating there when he was twenty-one years old.

to this day.¹⁵ While living in this cave he had a vision of a goddess, Dpal lha mo,¹⁶ who promised to act as the protectress of the site, and of Buddhism in general. According to another account,¹⁷ on the third day of their retreat, the king and his two queens had visions of the Three Protectors, who promised to help the king realize his plan to introduce Buddhism into Tibet. They dissolved into a rock, and the figures of the three deities then emerged spontaneously from the rock-face. These self-arisen images of the three deities are to this day found on the main altar of the Temple of the Three Protectors in the southern part of Pha bong kha hermitage. Finally, Pha bong kha is said to be the place where Srong btsan sgam po and his court created Tibet's first legal code: the set of "sixteen rules of purity for the populace" (*mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug*), which was then spread throughout the empire.¹⁸

Version Two¹⁹

In the alternate narrative of the founding of Pha bong kha, the Jo khang has already been built, and the king and his ministers are residing in Lha sa. One morning, while inspecting the Lha sa Valley from atop the roof of the White Palace in Lha sa, they noticed "a large dark shape" (*nag ril chen po zhig*) in the middle of the trees on the side of Cakrasamvara mountain north of Lha sa. The next day they went to inspect the site, and saw that the dark shape was a giant rock shaped like a turtle. Srong btsan sgam po thought to himself, "Thon mi is about to return from India, and I should build him a palace that can serve as the headquarters from which he can spread the new written language. This place [Pha bong kha] is a beautiful place, and the turtle is a wondrous thing. I will build Thon mi's palace here."



The self-arisen image of the protector deity Dpal lha mo inside Srong btsan sgam po's meditation cave.

¹⁵ Srong btsan sgam po's act of meditating *inside* the Female Turtle might of course be seen as an act of penetration of Tibet's natural spirits, a subjugation of the indigenous spirits of Tibet through an act akin to rape.

¹⁶ This goddess, who presumably as the same deity later known as Dpal lhan lha mo, came to be considered the protector deity of Tibet. After the rise of the Ganden Palace (Dga' ldan pho brang – the government of the Da lai bla mas) the cult of Dpal lhan lha mo became incorporated into the rituals of the state. *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 31a, states that this cave is the actual palace (*pho brang ngos*) of the deity.

¹⁷ *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 22a.

¹⁸ *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 32b-33a.

¹⁹ The account that follows is principally based on that found in *Dungkar Dictionary* (*Dung dkar tshig mdzod*). The account in *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 19bf, on the site's relationship to Thon mi and to the founding of the Tibetan written language, varies only slightly from the one given here.

The king designed the palace himself. Once the foundation was finished, he had molten metal poured onto it so that the turtle-rock and the nine-story building would be forever fused as one. Once Thon mi arrived, Srong btsan sgam po set him up in this palace, and Thon mi began to teach the written language – first to the king and his ministers, and then to others, who in turn spread this knowledge throughout Tibet.²⁰ But before beginning to instruct his fellow Tibetans, Thon mi wrote the six-syllable *mantra* (*om maṇi padme huṃ*) for the sake of good luck. According to one account, the king saw these letters, was amazed, and had them engraved onto a rock. An alternative account tells us that Thon mi from the outset traced out the letters onto the rock’s surface, and that they then magically emerged in bas-relief in a self-arisen image fashion. This rock has been preserved, and can be seen in the Temple of the Three Protectors at Pabongkha Hermitage (*Pha bong kha ri khrod*) even to this day.²¹



The stone bearing what oral lore says are the first Tibetan letters written by Thon mi, kept in the Temple of the Three Protectors at Pha bong kha.

The Gendered/Sexual Landscape

There is one other aspect of the site – related to the narrative of the turtle – that must be mentioned. Oral tradition has it that there are in fact not one but *two* turtle spirits on the site, each associated with its own boulder. The boulder that sits lower on the hill – the one on which Srong btsan sgam po built his castle – is said to be the Female Turtle. Northeast of the Female Turtle, farther uphill, there is another larger boulder identified as the Male Turtle. A small structure (before 1959, it was a *stūpa*) has been built atop it. Oral tradition has it that the Male Turtle is attempting to slide down the hill to unite sexually with the Female Turtle, and that if this event

²⁰ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 15, cites the Fifth Dalai Lama's *The Nāga Song of the Queen of Springtime* (*Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i klu dbyangs*) as the source for this tradition.

²¹ *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 20a, states that therefore "(Pha bong kha) appears to be the site in Lha sa known as the 'Moon Cliff,' which is said to be where the first Tibetan letters were engraved."

occurs, it will usher in an apocalypse – that is, the destruction of the universe by wind, fire, water, and so forth.

There are two factors that are seen as preventing this. First, each of the two turtle boulders is fixed in its respective location by Buddhist monuments. The Female Turtle is fixed in place by the castle/temple built by Srong btsan sgam po, which is said to have a mythic axis/pole running through its middle that pierces the heart of the Female Turtle and holds her in place so that she cannot move.²² The Male Turtle is held in place by the previously-mentioned *stūpa*. Second, the *stūpas* that have been built between the two turtles are said to act as an additional barrier – a second line of defense, as it were – between the two boulders/spirits. In one account, there are said to be one hundred and eight *stūpas*, each one of them containing one bead from Tsong kha pa’s rosary.²³



The Male Turtle Boulder.

The myth of the turtles both presumes and reinforces aspects of Tibetan gender ideology. First, the relative position of the two turtles is hardly accidental. In the natural world, as in the social world, the male must be located higher. Sexually speaking, as well, the cultural logic requires that the male be in a position to mount the female – yet another reason for situating the Male Turtle on top of (and descending towards) the female. It might seem strange that sexual union, a generative act, should be seen here not only as threatening, but as the very deed that ushers in the end of the world cycle. But we must remember that this was most likely an oral myth created by monks, and that for monks sex *is* the end of a world – the end of their vows, and therefore of their life/world as celibates. Sex that takes place within the confines of a monastery is, moreover, considered to be a great sin (*sdig pa chen po*). Sex in a holy place also brings pollution. From several vantage points, therefore, there is an imperative to keep sex from happening within the

²² In this narrative the Female Turtle takes the place of the supine demoness spoken of in the myths of the founding of the Jo khang.

²³ There is a certain anachronism here, given that (at least in some versions of the history of the site) the *stūpas* are said to have been built by the early Bka’ gdams pa masters who lived at the site, and who *predate* Tsong kha pa by several centuries.

confines of Pha bong kha. Finally, we must not forget that the turtles are in actuality geo-spirits (*sa bdag*): the powerful indigenous gods who are the original “owners” of Lha sa. The mating of the two spirits might have been seen as potentially leading to the proliferation of these creatures as a species, or to their reassertion of power over the land that was once theirs. To have allowed this to happen is to have risked the destruction of the world of Buddhism, whose existence on Tibetan soil depends *metaphysically* on the control of Tibet’s native spirits. The *stūpas* that separate the turtle spirits in the physical space of the monastery are the physical symbols of Buddhism as the force that controls the indigenous spirits of the country in the meta-physical sphere.

Later History

Although the various accounts agree that Pha bong kha was originally built as a fort and not as a monastery, traditional lore has it that the site was converted into a religious center very early in its history. Initially, it is said to have served as the home to “about a hundred tantrikas.”²⁴ According to some accounts, after Tibetans began to get ordained as Buddhist monks, Pha bong kha was converted into a residence for the first seven Tibetan monks (*sad mi mi bdun*). This would have taken place during the reign of Khri srong lde’u btsan). If this is true,²⁵ it would make Pha bong kha one of the oldest monasteries in Tibet.

Pha bong kha was destroyed during the reign of King Glang dar ma. There are different accounts of this event. In the more naturalistic version given by Dung dkar rin po che, the temple on the rock was completely destroyed by the king. According to the more *super*-naturalistic version current among the monks of the monastery, Glang dar ma began to destroy the nine-story temple story-by-story starting from the top. After destroying four stories, the deity Dpal lha mo appeared to him and told him to stop.²⁶ A five-story temple then remained. During the Cultural Revolution the temple lost two more stories. This explains how today it is a three-story building.

We know little about Pha bong kha between the time of Glang dar ma and the eleventh century. It was then that the site was re-established as a Bka’ gdams pa monastery by one of the most important masters of that tradition. The great Bka’ gdams pa master **Po to ba rin chen gsal** (1027/31-1105) is said to have lived in the so-called “Cave of the Tenth Day” (Tshes bcu phug),²⁷ for a period of time. Pha

²⁴ *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 15: “from the time (of Srong btsan sgam po) up to the ordination of the seven original monks, about one hundred tantrikas with long locks of hair lived continuously at the site.”

²⁵ The claim is made not only in *Dungkar Dictionary* (*Dung dkar tshig mdzod*), but also in *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 33a-b.

²⁶ This is according to the oral account of one of the Pha bong kha monks. According to the *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 34b, Dpal lha mo intervened by calling for Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje, the monk who assassinated Glang dar ma.

²⁷ The only cave that exists at Pha bong kha today is Srong btsan sgam po’s cave located inside the Female Turtle Boulder. And in fact *Pha bong kha’i dkar chag*, 31a, confirms that it is this cave that is called the “Temple of the Tenth Day” (Tshes bcu lha khang). The cave apparently got its name from the fact that members of Khri srong lde’u btsan’s inner circle used to perform rituals inside the cave

bong kha is the site where Po to ba rin chen gsal transmitted many of the Bka' gdams pa teachings to Dge bshes brag dkar ba (1032-1111), one of his eight great close disciples (*bka' babs bu chen brgyad*).²⁸ Because Po to ba rin chen gsal was quite old at the time, he regretted that he could not bring Pha bong kha back to its former glory, so he entrusted this work to his student. It is Dge bshes brag dkar ba, then, who is credited with the re-establishment of Pha bong kha as a monastic institution.²⁹ He stayed in retreat in the Cave of the Tenth Day for quite some time, and during this period gathered many disciples. He then began the process of reconstruction, and rebuilt at least two stories of the temple that had been destroyed during Glang dar ma's reign. He also taught extensively at Pha bong kha until his death at around the age of eighty. During his decades of residence at Pha bong kha, upwards of three hundred monks gathered around him. The monastery appears to have remained a Bka' gdams pa institution for the next two hundreds of years, passing through seven or more abbots, and growing in size to upwards of four hundred monks.³⁰ Many *stūpas*³¹ are said to have been built at the site by the successive Bka' gdams pa masters who held the throne of Pha bong kha, and some of these monuments still exist at the site today. A small *clay tablet repository* (*tsa khang*) to the east of the temple of the Three Protectors is also said to have been built during the Bka' gdams pa period as an antidote to demonic influences.

After the seventh Bka' gdams pa abbot of Pha bong kha, the monastery went into a period of decline. It appears that it may have then become a Sa skya institution around the time of 'Phags pa (1235-1280), remaining under Sa skya pa control for a period of about two hundred years. At the time of Phag mo gru pa hegemony, Pha bong kha once again went into a period of decline. Tsong kha pa, the founder of the Dge lugs pa school, apparently remained in retreat at Pha bong kha for a short period of time. The site was once again revived – this time as a Dge lugs institution – by Paṅ chen bde legs nyi ma (sixteenth century). Under Paṅ chen bde legs nyi ma's abbacy, Pha bong kha thrived, at least for a short period of time, but, like many institutions in and around Lha sa, it suffered as a result of the internecine warfare that plagued Central Tibet as a whole, and Pha bong kha once again went into a period of decline.

on the tenth day of the lunar month. Since the monastery is in a fairly flat area, it is difficult to imagine that there was any other cave at the hermitage itself in the past. However, *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 30f, lists many caves. These, one assumes, are located in the hills above Pha bong kha.

²⁸ Literally, “the eight great sons who received the oral instruction”; also called the “eight great ones who were named to receive the oral instructions” (Bka' babs ming can brgyad).

²⁹ The Fifth Dalai Lama, in fact, does not mention Po to ba at all, and credits the re-founding of Pha bong kha to Dge bshes brag dkar ba; see Ṅag-dBaṅ Blo-bZaṅ rGya-mTSHo, Fifth Dalai Lama, *A History of Tibet*, trans. by Zahiruddin Ahmad (Bloomington: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1995), 84.

³⁰ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 16, mentions a certain “Geshé Pabongkha” (Dge bshes pha bong khar grags pa) as having been responsible for increasing the size of the monastery to 400 monks after Dge bshes brag dkar ba's tenure.

³¹ The tradition says that hundred and eight *stūpas* were built. But it also claims that each *stūpa* contained one bead from Tsong kha pa's rosary. This, of course, would be impossible if they were built during the Bka' gdams pa period, since Tsong kha pa was not born until more than 200 years after this time.



Stūpas at Pha bong kha that are said to date to the Bka' gdams pa period.

It was in year 1619 that Pha bong kha came under the aegis of the great Dge lugs pa master 'Khon ston dpal 'byor lhun grub (1561-1637). 'Khon ston was a *bla ma* renowned for his ecumenical outlook. He was an important figure in the history of Se ra, and one of the teachers of the Fifth Dalai Lama. After the death of 'Khon ston, the Fifth Dalai Lama had “a three story palace”³² built at Pha bong kha. He commissioned an image of his teacher, and endowed the institution generously by providing it with fields, pastures for animals, and many head of yak.³³ He also became (at least nominally) the head of Pha bong kha, and it seems that he inaugurated a tradition according to which all of the successive Da lai bla mas visited the institution at least once in their lives.

Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705), the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, lists the following abbots from the time of 'Khon ston up to his own day:

- Dpal 'byor rab rgyas (1604-1669)
- Se ra pa 'jam dbyangs grags pa (b. seventeenth century)
- Mkhan ngag dbang bstan 'dzin³⁴
- Smad bla zur blo bzang don grub³⁵

Pha bong kha has remained a Dge lugs institution up to the present time. Informants tell us that one of the great *bla mas* of Se ra, Lha btsun rin po che, established a lama's residence (*bla brang*) at Pha bong kha at some point in time, but we do not know when precisely this was. This compound now lies in ruins.

³² *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 44b. It is unclear which (if any) of the present buildings this might be.

³³ *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 44b: *rab byung gnyug mar gnas pa'i ja tshul thebs/ snye thang bkra shis gling/ gzhis ka dud 'dzin bcu/ lag 'bab khal drug brgya/ nyang bran ka ma can dud gsum dang/ lag 'bab la khal drug cu skor bstsal/.*

³⁴ Perhaps TBRC P939 or P3188?

³⁵ Perhaps TBRC P162?

Before 1959 Pha bong kha was an independent monastery, albeit one that had had strong historical and social ties to Se ra for several hundred years of its history. According to one informant, before 1959 only fully ordained monks were allowed to live at Pha bong kha. While this may have been true in theory, it is difficult to imagine that this rule was strictly observed, given that so much of the



The ruins of the Lhaptün Rinpoché's estate (Lha btsun rin po che'i bla brang) at Pha bong kha.

menial labor in small monasteries like this one (hauling water, cleaning, serving tea, etc.) is traditionally done by novice monks.

As with many of Tibet's great monasteries, Pha bong kha was forcibly closed after the events of 1959. Many of its important images³⁶ were destroyed. It remained closed until the monks of Se ra formally applied for permission to rebuild the site. They began the project of restoring Pha bong kha in the mid 1980s. Today Pha bong kha is owned and administered by Se ra, and all of the monks of the hermitage are Se ra monks.

³⁶ Among the more interesting and important images or religious objects mentioned in *Pha bong kha'i dkar chag*, 47bf, are the following: a set of sixteen *arhat* statues made by Po to ba rin chen gsal himself, a tooth relic of the Buddha Dipamkara, stone statues of Avalokiteśvara and of the protector Trak shad blessed by virtue of the deities' dissolving into them, the self-arisen stone statue that emerged as Srong btsan sgam po was gestating in his mother's womb, the statue of 'Khon ston dpal 'byor lhun grub commissioned by the Fifth Dalai Lama as well as the his highly ornamented funerary *stūpa* that contained his actual body, a silver funerary *stūpa* and statue of 'Jam dbyangs grags pa, a one-story statue of the Buddha made in part from the gold extracted by King Mes dbon from "Gold Cave," a speaking statue of Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog) that conversed with the Da lai bla ma Bskal bzang rgya mtsho (1708-1757) while he was doing the retreat of this deity; the self-arisen stone images of the Three Protectors (mentioned above); Thon mi's "*om mani padme hūm*" stone, statues of Tsong kha pa in the five-visions-forms, a volume of the *dhāraṇī* that dates to the Sa skya period. This, of course, is only a sampling of the more important artifacts; there were many other images and religious objects beside those mentioned here. Most of the images in the hermitage were lost or destroyed after 1959.