

Introduction



Horseman on the New Year's parade, 1938/39.

INTRODUCTION

While studies on Tibetan history make steady progress, especially over the last few decades, it is still regrettable that they provide little detail and cover only a part of the overwhelmingly rich textual and oral tradition that retells myths and events (often both neatly intertwined), individuals and institutions (needless to say both strongly interrelated) and of religious and secular nature (again often hard to distinguish), unfolding over many centuries. Given the fact that the number of scholars specialized in this field is not exceedingly high, there are a many lacunae in Tibetan history that are still unexplored. One of the topics rarely studied in detail is the political rule and its change from the 14th century to the 15th/16th century and, in particular, the role of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa noble house.

The first publication that drew attention to this subject was authored by Giuseppe Tucci in form of his formidable *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, first published in 1949. Based on the historiographical work issued under the supervision of the 5th Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682), the “Song of the Queen of Spring”, Giuseppe Tucci devoted a large part of his seminal book to a full, annotated translation of this Tibetan source, bringing, for the first time, the complexity of Tibetan history and its major players, from a Tibetan (and, to be more exact, Dge lugs pa) point of view, to the attention of a broader Western audience. The noble house of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, among others, was introduced and outlined within the limits set by the 5th Dalai Lama. Again by taking a primary source as a base for exploring Tibetan history, Giuseppe Tucci offered a full translation with annotations of the *Deb ther dmar po gsar ma* authored by the Pan chen Bsod nams grags pa (1478–1554). This work, published in 1971, was once more based on an important Tibetan historiographical text. The Tibetan author, himself belonging to the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa clan, gave much consideration to this very noble house, its ups and downs in political history with a detailed treatment of its proponents. By translating both these major sources, Giuseppe Tucci has laid the foundation of future research, also with regard to the Phag mo gru pa.

This fine Italian scholarship was continued by Luciano Petech with his groundbreaking study *Central Tibet and the Mongols. The Yüan-Sa-skyä period of Tibetan history* in 1990. Well-acquainted with the politics of that time, documented also by a substantial number of fine articles coming from his pen, he attempted to write the history of that time, by relying and interpreting a large variety of sources from different languages. His work was, and still is, a major contribution to the field of Tibetan history. It pays special attention to the rise of Phag mo gru pa under Byang chub rgyal mtshan, highlighting the main political motives and developments that brought a transition in the power structure from the Sa skyä dominion to the Phag mo gru pa hegemony. His detailed analysis also includes the crucial relationship of the religious schools, such as the Sa skyä pa, and noble houses, such as the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, to the Imperial court in China and its many institutions that influenced Tibetan affairs (and were influenced as well by Tibetans and their political decisions). Needless to say, for someone intending to write a thesis on this subject, it was a much welcomed, inspiring source. In fact, at the very start of working on the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, it was taken as the basis for covering the events of the rise of this noble house under Byang chub rgyal mtshan. However, when discrepancies between his work and my own findings began to pile up, especially in the interpretation of the fundamental source of that period, the ‘Political Testament’ (*Bka’ chems*) by Byang chub rgyal mtshan, Petech’s study could not be used as a base anymore. Initially forming something like a backbone for the period in question, now, because of the persistence and seriousness of such discrepant statements, it collapsed like a house of cards. Consequently, it had to be set aside in its entirety and a fresh start had to be made by following a strict chronological approach. This was soon extended over all centuries under consideration. By these steps, the intention was to stay as close as possible to the

narration as offered in Tibetan primary sources and to keep a critical distance from further secondary literature. These sources more than once offered a proper evaluation of Tibetan historical events, even though they were based on a very limited textual base of Tibetan sources. At the same time, it should be stressed that this chronological approach is, in no way, the only possible manner to trace the politics of a noble family or institutions in Tibetan society, in general, or the Phag mo gru pa noble house, in particular. In fact, such a periodization can also be problematic, because it suggests a linear chronology that never existed in the mind of those involved or plan for the events which unfolded. This attempt to arrange events in accordance with its occurrence in time, putting them in a narrative order, can accentuate the nature of some datable events and developments, forming a possible route of interpretation. Naturally, it will be only one view on the complexity of Tibetan society, or as here of a Tibetan clan, that is further restricted by the nature of the sources employed for this undertaking – historic and religious writings. This follows the line of political history, discussing events, leaders, groups and ideas. Related fields such as social and economic history, for instance, could not be included in this study, even though they are essential for a full understanding. This is mostly due to a lack of sources and the extinction of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa noble house and its related religious school. It can only be hoped that in future such documents, that might be still in the Lhasa archives, will come to light and accordingly examined by other scholars.

When speaking of previous academic works dealing with the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa family, one has to refer to the important articles by Leonard van der Kuijp. They deal with different events such as those related to the succession of Phag mo gru pa family and its rule in his discussion of the *Lho rong chos 'byung* but, most significantly, these articles examine the deeds of Byang chub rgyal mtshan. It was due to van der Kuijp's continuing scholarly endeavours and findings, that many fascinating insights into this personage were provided to a Western readership. For this present study they represented invaluable works, even though in several respects a slightly different evaluation of events was preferred for this study.

With the above mentioned articles and publications, all of the secondary sources of significance regarding the study of the Phag mo gru pa have been named in full. There are no others. As is apparent the current research on this matter has not matched the historical relevance of this noble house that once ruled Central Tibet and helped to shape Tibetan political ideas and institutions. In the hope of coming to a more accurate picture of this family and its major political lines of development, a variety of textual sources was analyzed for this work, including religious and genealogical histories, biographies, letters and a variety of others. Two of the most important sources were the so-called 'Political Testament' (*Bka' chems*) and the *Po ti bse ru*.

The *Po ti bse ru* represents a genealogy of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa that will be outlined in detail in the first chapter of this study. The homeland of the Rlangs Lha gzig was Eastern Tibet. The genealogical account, in which its mythical beginnings are described, shows narrative elements that bring it close to other mythical expositions, which are still partly preserved in sources with a Bon background. One can assume that such notions were common for other aristocratic families as well, but at a certain point in time these underwent certain changes, bringing in genealogical elements with an Indian and Buddhist background such as the 'Gods of Clear Light' (*'od gsal lha, abhasvaradeva*). In this regard it is noteworthy that the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa did not supersede such notions on their own account and thus 'modernise' it. Because of this one still encounters an 'old' account on the evolution of god and men. Similarly remarkable is that the genealogy of the Rlangs Lha gzig also shows features which point out to a partly nomadic background. The lineage of heroes should be referred to in this context, but the discussion of *mi chos* too is a fascinating and rare insight into the ethical-political values of a secular community. Nevertheless, a transition can be observed within the genealogical account of the *Po ti bse ru*. The list of *mahāsiddhas* is undoubtedly a reflection of the growing

dominance of religious figures whose spiritual accomplishments and prestige became formative for any family and its genealogical presentation. An important position is occupied by Dpal gyi seng ge, who bears features not only of a legendary hero but as an accomplished yogi as well. Thus he can be regarded as a transitional figure. In contrast to this, Su ga ta go cha was a fully ordained monk, who is even placed as one of the seven first ordained monks in Tibet. More important than these two figures is undoubtedly Byang chub rdo rje *alias* Byang chub 'dre bkol. He might be regarded as being similar to Padmasambhava, whose mind incarnation he is said to be. His spiritual accomplishments are based on his magical abilities to tame gods and demons. His status is further enhanced by his relation to the legendary king Gesar. With respect to the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa it is of significance that he is said to have discovered the *Rlangs Po ti bse ru*, the genealogical treatise that is indispensable to the identity of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. How important this figure was for them can also be seen in the fact that he is credited with making the prophecy on the future of this clan and on the *si tu* Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302–1364), in particular. This historic presentation, which is a later fabrication, was one of the legitimising bases for the Phag mo gru pa rule in Central Tibet.

Of utmost significance for the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa in Central Tibet became the activities of one of its most prominent members – Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po (1110–1170), even though he belonged only to a sub-unit of this clan. His biography will be briefly introduced in the first part of the 2nd chapter of this study. The second part is devoted to the time after his death and the beginnings of the monastery of Gdan sa mthil that later developed into a monastic stronghold of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa school and family.

In the 12th century Rdo rje rgyal po was one of the main religious figures who were able to initiate an enduring religious development resulting in the establishment of many important Bka' brgyud pa schools. Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po became the central figure of the Rlangs Lha gzigs, even though his stay at Phag mo gru was not aimed at establishing a monastic centre. The fact that a monastery, which became known as Gdan sa mthil, was built was due finally to the efforts of his pupils. At this phase 'Bri gung pa 'Jig rten mgon po, a pupil of Rdo rje rgyal po, became instrumental for the future of this monastic settlement. At first his plans did not include the notion of a strong and thriving centre at Gdan sa mthil despite his participation in the erection of the main hall of Gdan sa mthil. The transfer of the books from Gdan sa mthil to Sgam po monastery and, in particular, the *bkra shis 'od 'bar*-stupa in 1208 strongly indicates that he intended to shift the religious centre from Gdan sa mthil to his own monastery in 'Bri gung and to enhance the prestige of 'Bri gung (and the monastery of Sgam po, which at that time was virtually a dependency of 'Bri gung). When this plan failed, he followed another strategy which partly restored the religious importance of Gdan sa mthil by returning the *bkra shis 'od 'bar*. Notably, at the same time he appointed Grags pa 'byung gnas, a member of the Rlangs Lha gzigs-clan, as the first proper abbot of Gdan sa mthil. This act, which was undoubtedly a compromise – the return of the *bkra shis 'od 'bar* for the agreement to accept this appointment –, was the actual beginning of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa in Central Tibet.

During the abbotship of Grags pa 'byung gnas, who belonged to the Rlangs Lha gzigs, the political entity which became known as the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, could manifest in Dbus. The 3rd chapter of this study will enquire how this new development came about and how this clan expanded politically during the 13th century. As argued above, this occurred at that very time Gdan sa mthil and its abbots could hardly be called an independent school due to their close ties to the 'Bri gung pa. However, step by step the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa achieved an autonomy that was also fostered by external circumstances like the Mongol hegemony over Tibet and its manifold effects, which dominated the political life in the form of administrative units which were known as the *khri skor* system. Under Grags pa 'byung gnas (1175–1255/56) the old alliances and connections enjoyed by the 'Bri gung pa were also fostered by the Phag mo gru pa and thus formed an important part of the patron

and priest relationship, which was of utmost importance for any religious community. The Khasa kingdom (Ya rtse) should be referred to in this instance, but reference should also be made to the Tangut kingdom. During his abbotship relations with the 'Bri gung pa remained close and cordial but nevertheless Gdan sa mthil became a monastery of its own rank and can hardly be called secondary in any respect in comparison with the former. His successor the *rgyal ba rin po che* Grags pa brtson 'grus (1203–1267), his younger half-brother, continued both these tendencies in the political identity of the monastic community of Gdan sa mthil.

The first *khri dpon*, Ldan ma Sgom brtson, faced serious problems, which were caused by the disintegration of the Hülegü appanage. He did not have the political and military means to stop this process. This probably added to his final abdication from the post that was forced by Grags pa 'byung gnas. His successor became the *dpon* Rdo rje dpal, who was also of the Rlangs Lha gzigs. His installation turned out to be a wise decision of far-reaching consequences. Although he too could not bring back those territories that had already broken away, he founded twelve estates (*gzhis ka*), which formed the backbone of the Phag mo gru pa *khri skor*. Foremost among them was surely Sne'u gdong rtse, which became the political and administrative centre of the Phag mo gru pa. The other estates established by him were also of great significance, strengthening the influence of the Phag mo gru pa in Yar klungs and adjacent regions and in the vicinity of Gdan sa mthil. The *dpon* Rdo rje dpal served in the capacity of *khri dpon* during the abbotship of the *rgyal ba rin po che* Grags pa brtson 'grus (1203–1267) and the *bcu gnyis pa* Rin chen rdo rje (1218–1281). After his death his successors as *khri dpon* showed less capability, if one trusts the testimony of Byang chub rgyal mtshan, and many territories of the Phag mo gru pa *khri skor* were lost. Surely, this was not only due to the incapability of those personalities but also a tribute to the fact of the growing tension between the 'Bri gung pa and Sa skya pa, which found the Phag mo gru pa in an awkward position. Though they could not fully neglect their close affiliation to the 'Bri gung pa, they were also not willing to throw in their lot with them in their struggle with the Sa skya pa. One of the main reasons was that they simply did not have the means to do so. Steadily, the Sa skya pa were increasing their authority and power in Tibet. Their constant attempts to interfere directly and indirectly in the affairs of others, for instance by influencing the order of succession of religious schools and noble houses, could also be felt by the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa as in the case of the *spyan snga* Grags pa ye shes documents.

With the *spyan snga* Grags pa ye shes (1240–1288) members of the Rlangs Lha gzigs permanently settled in Central Tibet. The generation following him lived in this region and fostered their Eastern Tibetan roots in a wider sense only. This transition occurred simultaneously with a transference of influence from one fraction of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa to another. This struggle between fractions was a feature of constant occurrence and did in the end weaken the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa significantly.

In the 13th century the line of Yon chen Rgyal ba skyabs (fl.12th cent.) and his first wife Bro ldog bza' were replaced by the line that had issued from his second wife De gu ma. Whether or not this happened due to the fact that the former line had died out or the latter was simply more influential cannot be conclusively said, based on the historic material. The *spyan snga* Grags pa ye shes (1240–1288) belonged to that second line. When he died in the last quarter of the 13th century, he was followed by his younger brother Grags pa rin chen (1250–1310).

It was during Grags pa rin chen's tenancy that the conflict between the Sa skya pa and the 'Bri gung pa erupted into open violence in 1290. The Rlangs Phag mo gru pa were also affected by this. It is evident that they did not openly side with the 'Bri gung pa but maintained a kind of neutrality that in fact was a submission to the Sa skya pa, who openly threatened them in the case that they might assist their enemy. The then Phag mo gru pa *khri dpon* Byang gzhon therefore abstained from any involvement – a wise decision, albeit one that did not find the retrospective consent of Byang chub rgyal

mtshan but was nevertheless undoubtedly the best what Byang gzhon could do in this precarious situation. Thus, the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa did not share the same fate as the 'Bri gung pa, whose centre was burnt down and whose estates, of which large parts were scattered over Tibet, came into the possession of the Sa skya pa. However, there is no doubt that the outcome of this crisis also weakened the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. A slow but steady process of disintegration allowed the Phag mo gru pa *khri skor* to decline. Several estates and settlements were lost to secular and religious leaders during the term of the *khri dpon* Gzhon nu yon tan, the successor of Byang gzhon. Additionally, his inability to rule and to carry out his duties made it necessary to dismiss him and to transfer his office to the *spyang snga* Grags pa rin chen (1250–1310). By this, for the first time, a member of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa held both secular and religious rule (*bla dpon*), a phenomenon that from then onwards can be encountered frequently within the political entity of this family. It seems that this appointment went hand in hand with attempts to balance the disintegrating tendencies within the Phag mo gru pa *khri skor*. However, a full restoration of its former state was far from possible.

In the 4th chapter an attempt will be made to illuminate the complex political reality during the 14th century, as it was encountered by the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. Briefly said, the future of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was once more uncertain, when in the first decade of the 14th century the *spyang snga* Grags pa rin chen passed away. The vacant throne of Gdan sa mthil was occupied by one of his nephews, Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1293–1360), who, as it turned out, enjoyed a long abbotship and made the monastic community of Gdan sa mthil a stable but less influential factor in the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa politics. However, he did not attempt to simultaneously rule in the secular sphere. The office of *khri dpon* became a matter of dispute and the men who were in charge of it could hold this office for a short term only. Two fractions of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa were vying with each other for this influential post. On the one hand, the fraction to which the then current *spyang snga* Grags pa rgyal mtshan belonged hoped to keep this office in their hands. The appointment of his brothers Rgyal mtshan dpal and Grags pa bzang po were not, however, lasting and soon the second fraction under Rgyal mtshan skyabs could transfer it back to their family at the end of the second decade of the 14th century.

In the coming years, however, they failed to keep it due to the influence of the Sa skya pa, and once more the post of the *khri dpon* was vacant. The *spyang snga* Grags pa rgyal mtshan also did not want to take on the burden of this office and therefore left it to his younger half-brother Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302–1364). The beginning of his tenure was not promising, for the near future Byang chub rgyal mtshan was to face serious problems. The former *khri dpon* Rgyal mtshan skyabs was taking every opportunity to challenge him and the legacy of his office. Another threatening factor was the open animosity with the G.ya' bzang pa, who were continually struggling with him over a number of disputed estates in the Yar klungs region. Byang chub rgyal mtshan coped with these threats with varied levels of success – sometimes it looked as if he had attained his goals only to see a complete about-face which sometimes brought him and his legacy to the brink of annihilation. These peaks and troughs can be observed for the first decade of his office of *khri dpon*.

The following decade showed much of the same but with an additional new danger – the attempt to remove him from his post by questioning the validity of his legacy. This new quality of struggle against his rule brought also new opponents on the political agenda. The Sa skya branch of Lha khang utilised its influence and used the *dpon chen* Dbang brtson in order to force Byang chub rgyal mtshan to abdicate. However, this attempt failed at first and just led to a compromise. In the end, Byang chub rgyal mtshan was not removed from the post of *khri dpon*.

This did not, however, bring about a change regarding the fact that he was still a thorn in the flesh of some influential religious and secular leaders who still wanted his rule to fail. In 1346 when the still smouldering conflict with the G.ya' bzang pa entered a new round, it was taken as an opportunity by

the *dpon chen* Rgyal ba bzang po to imprison Byang chub rgyal mtshan. In the end he had to be taken out of prison due to his firm refusal to give in and the constant backing of his followers as well as supporters within the Sa skya pa. It now came to a showdown with open warfare between the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, on the one hand, and the *dpon chen* Dbang brtson and his allies, on the other. The victory of Byang chub rgyal mtshan changed the political landscape fundamentally. The Rlangs Phag mo gru pa had become a major though not undisputed power in Dbus. In subsequent fighting, their enemies were not able to diminish the position of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa and they were defeated. In the course of this fighting Byang chub rgyal mtshan, though, was able to strengthen the territorial unity of his *khri skor* by the inclusion of estates which did not formerly belong to it. Of crucial importance was the seizure of Gong dkar, which occurred in 1350. With this he was able to include an estate, which allowed Yar klungs to become his 'reserve', keeping it out of direct military clashes, and at the same time created a stepping stone to interfere in the affairs of Gtsang province. Gong dkar was the most important of his fortresses, which are traditionally counted as thirteen and which form the backbone of his successful military strategy.

The skilful and shrewd policy of Byang chub rgyal mtshan aimed at keeping the estate of Gong dkar by legal confirmation, limiting the influence of the 'Bri gung pa and others, getting himself permanently established in Gtsang by founding the estate of Rin spungs, weakening the Sa skya pa by fostering the Gzhi thog branch and forming a Chu mig *khri skor*. The first points he accomplished successfully but the last he never fully realised. Nevertheless, at the end of his life Byang chub rgyal mtshan was the supreme Tibetan leader and had made the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa the hegemonial power in Central Tibet.

The death of Byang chub rgyal mtshan coincided with the demise of the Yuan dynasty. His last attempts to establish a firm line of familial succession were fruitful, even though his plan for Shakya rin chen to follow him turned out to be a premature decision. Instead of Shakya rin chen (1347–1428), his elder brother Shakya rgyal mtshan (1340–1373) became the new ruler. When the emperors of new Chinese Ming dynasty had firmly established their rule, they also expressed concern over the Tibetan situation but did so by taking on a new policy, partly in contrast to that of the former Yuan rulers. The Ming emperors were still interested in exerting some influence over their Western neighbours but not to the extent that was common under the Yuan rulers. The *khri skor* system was not continued and the appointment of Tibetan officials in Tibet was lowered to a degree that kept a Chinese interest in this region but without making the Tibetan politico-administrative system dependent on them. With regard to Tibet, the predominant position of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was fully accepted by the Ming and was supported by bestowing titles and seals.

With the death of Shakya rgyal mtshan the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa rule came under the influence of the maternal uncles (*sku zhang*) who acted as ministers but were, in fact, those who directed the policy of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. The secular rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa has to be seen by this political fact. The new arrangements with regard to the seats of Gdan sa mthil, Rtsed thang and Sne'u gdong rtse were by and large done by the *rdzong ji* Rgyal mtshan bzang po. The second of these arrangements still left the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse in the hands of the family line of Bsod nams bzang po's second wife Mang nya ma, while the new abbot of Rtsed thang became Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1374–1432), who belonged to the line of Nyi ru ma, the first wife of Bsod nams bzang po. A few years later, in 1385, another change in the political administration of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa occurred. Now suddenly Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1374–1432) became the new *sde srid* and Bsod nams grags pa (1359–1408) was forced to abdicate. For the next few years the Phag mo gru pa court was in the firm grip of the *rdzong ji* Rgyal mtshan bzang po but soon resistance was growing. Under Grags pa rgyal mtshan factions were gathering at the Sne'u gdong rtse court which were dedicated to remove the *rdzong ji* from their influential post. In about 1399 the *rdzong ji* Grags pa rin chen, probably

the son of the *rdzong ji* Rgyal mtshan bzang po, was murdered. Severe fighting broke out and became a real threat for the Phag mo gru pa administration, especially as several high-ranking officials were siding with the party of the murdered *rdzong ji*. It was the first major challenge for Grags pa rgyal mtshan and he fully mastered it, thus establishing himself as the undisputed ruler of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa.

This new development and its subsequent results will be looked into the 5th chapter. It also outlines the political events during the 15th century that, in the end, led to the decline of this noble house. During Grags pa rgyal mtshan's rule, which endured until his death in 1432, the Phag mo gru pa were at the height of their power. This can be also seen in the fact that three *bkra shis sgo mang* were built during his reign. He continued to appoint the officers for the estates, which belonged to the Phag mo gru pa sphere in addition to some new ones. The see of Gdan sa mthil and Rtsed thang were occupied by his younger brothers. It is justified to say that at that time Sne'u gdong rtse was the political centre of Tibet while Rtsed thang was among those monasteries, which at that time, were famous for higher studies. Grags pa rgyal mtshan, who received the title of a *dbang* from the Ming emperors, sponsored several religious schools of which one might particularly mentioned: the new spiritual movement established by Tsong kha pa. It would be, however, misleading to assume that the *dbang* Grags pa rgyal mtshan exclusively patronised this school. A sponsorship can be also observed for the Karma Bka' brgyud pa for instance – the beginning of a relationship that became of some significance for the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa for the next century.

It seems that one aspect for the strong rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was a personality who was undisputed and able to rule and create unity within the family. With the death of the *dbang* Grags pa rgyal mtshan this precondition was only partially fulfilled. His younger brother Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1386–1434), who had chosen a spiritual career, was an authority not just among the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. Therefore his decision that Grags pa 'byung gnas (1414–1445), the son of Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan (1389–1457) and nephew of the late *dbang* Grags pa rgyal mtshan, should occupy the vacant throne of Sne'u gdong rtse was accepted by all. However, as soon as Bsod nams rgyal mtshan died in 1434 open fighting broke out between fractions of the Sne'u gdong rtse court – on one side, Grags pa 'byung gnas and his followers and, on the other, Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan, who questioned the legacy of the rule of his son and who aspired to take over the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse.

This fighting, which became known as the 'Inner Revolt' or 'Anarchy of the Year 1434', became a turning point in the history of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa and of Tibet as a whole. The disunity seriously weakened the rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, giving some aristocratic families the chance to become independent of them, such as the noble house of Rgyal mkhar rtse. This decline of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa can be also observed in the art for the monastery of Gdan sa mthil. Grags pa 'byung gnas became the last Phag mo gru pa ruler who commissioned a *bkra shis sgo mang* and this tradition came to an end.

Although the struggle between Grags pa 'byung gnas and his father Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan eventually ended up with a compromise, one of the powerful retainers of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, Nor bu bzang po (1403–1466), a member of the noble house of Rin spungs, took it as an opportunity to increase his influence without, however, challenging the supremacy of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa openly.

Grags pa 'byung gnas tried his best to continue the rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, as it was formerly executed by the *dbang* Grags pa rgyal mtshan, but in fact his authority was limited and did not enjoy the same acceptance as his famous predecessor. Nevertheless he was still able to keep the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa as the hegemonial power in Central Tibet. When he died in 1445, both candidates Ngag gi dbang po (1439–1491), the son of Grags pa 'byung gnas, and Kun dga' legs pa (1433–1482/83), the half-brother of Grags pa 'byung gnas were probably too young to be installed as *sde srid*.

It is noteworthy that the father of Grags pa 'byung gnas, Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan, did not take the vacant office. One might assume that a struggle had ensued behind the scenes regarding the successor of the late Grags pa 'byung gnas. For some years the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse remained empty.

At about this time Nor bu bzang po (1403–1466) of the noble house of Rin spungs took by means of treachery the fortress of Bsam grub rtse, which was of strategic importance in Gtsang province. This take-over was an important step of this noble house to establish their supremacy in Gtsang. By now their rule superseded the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa in this area and in fact became the new hegemonic power in Tibet. One has to stress that the Rin spungs pa never fully broke with their overlords the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. Instead, the Rin spungs pa instead followed a strategy to manipulate them and to control the current *sde srid*. One of their political strategies was a matrimonial policy between the Rin spungs pa and the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. This, beside their growing military power, gave the Rin spungs pa the opportunity to influence the court of Sne'u gdong rtse according to their own wishes.

How this influence manifested itself in reality can be observed throughout the next generations of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. When Kun dga' legs pa was enthroned in the summer of 1448, he was also obliged to marry a wife from the noble house of Rin spungs not much later. Six years later Ngag gi dbang po ascended the throne of Gdan sa mthil. It seems that Kun dga' legs pa was dedicated to becoming a strong ruler and to restore the former rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. In this context one has to see that Ngag gi dbang po was forced to abdicate the throne of Gdan sa mthil in favour of Kun dga' legs pa just one year later after the death of his father Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan.

The second event, or better process, that came to be formative for his rule and sheds a light on the relationship between the Rin spungs pa and the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was his attempt to diminish the influence of the Rin spungs pa at Sne'u gdong rtse. As outlined above, this met with the fierce resistance of his wife and later also his son Rdo rje rin chen dbang gi rgyal po (1458?–1476?). This dispute affected the entire court of Sne'u gdong rtse and the political life in Dbus. Interesting in this regard is the fact that the *sde srid* Kun dga' legs pa was only supported by the noble houses of Sne'u pa and 'Ol kha, while his opponents, beside his wife and his son, were the noble houses of Yar rgyab, Gong dkar, Bya yul and Bsam sde. This dependence on alliances, in order to realise one's political goals, became characteristic for the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa in the generations that followed.

When the conflict escalated and came to fighting between Sne'u gdong rtse and Rtsed thang, the potential risks of the marriage policy became evident. The death of Rdo rje rin chen dbang gi rgyal po and his mother are possibly related to this. It was at this time that the Rin spungs pa interfered directly and the estates of Mkhar thog and Dgon gsar, which were important for the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, were occupied by the Rin spungs pa Mtsho skyes rdo rje (1450–1510/13). This was a new phase in the relationship between the Rin spungs pa and the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, which not much later became even worse, when in 1480 the Rin spungs ruler Don yod rdo rje (1463–1512) launched a massive attack against Yar klungs and took the court of Sne'u gdong rtse by force. Now the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa were under complete control of the Rin spungs pa. Initially being appointed officers by their overlords, the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, the Rin spungs pa later accomplished to indirectly influence the decision at Sne'u gdong rtse, attempt to manipulate them and finally to interfere directly, thus the Rin spungs pa had completely undermined the rule of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa and eroded their power until it was only nominal. The installation of Ngag gi dbang po as the new *sde srid* in 1481, instead of Kun dga' legs pa, was the temporary peak in this unending confrontation between the former power, the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, and their opponents, the by then hegemonic noble house of Rin spungs. When soon after Kun dga' legs pa died at only fifty years old, it was clear that the plans of Kun dga' legs pa and his followers to restore the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa rule had fully failed because of the direct intervention of the Rin spungs pa.

It would be misleading to assume that the candidate of the Rin spungs pa, Ngag gi dbang po, was a follower of theirs. In fact, he also tried to restore the influence of his family, but he did not attempt to achieve it by military means. He had to marry, and fathered Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa (1488–1563/64). His concern about the situation of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa can be seen in the agreement that he prepared and formulated, when he felt that he would soon die. It was his plan that the 4th Zhva dmar pa Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524) should become see of the monastery at Gdan sa mthil. His main objective was surely to maintain the unity of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa and to win the 4th Zhva dmar pa Chos grags ye shes for this. A political entity only that is not fragmented could hope to resist the overwhelming influence of the Rin spungs pa. Undoubtedly, this very Zhva dmar pa incarnation, who was one of the most influential dignitaries of that time and closely affiliated with the Rin spungs pa, could be instrumental in achieving this. The 4th Zhva dmar pa Chos grags ye shes therefore became the see of Gdan sa mthil. It had significant influence on the affairs of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. In the coming years, the abbotship of this very monastic seat remained within the Zhva dmar pa incarnation line.

The throne of Sne'u gdong rtse, which the death of Ngag gi dbang po left vacant, would be taken by his son, Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa. This, and the events that he helped to shape, will be discussed in more detail in the 6th chapter. Until the maturity of Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa affairs were run by the Rin spungs pa Mtsho skyes rdo rje – a telling detail that once more highlights the particular relationship between both these noble houses.

When Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa assumed the office of a *sde srid*, he was seen merely as a pawn in the hands of the Rin spungs pa. However, as it turned out, Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa became a ruler who made great efforts to consolidate the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa power and its sovereignty. Notably, he found allies in both the Zhva nag pa and the Zhva dmar pa incarnation, who wanted to counterbalance the nearly unlimited power of the Rin spungs pa. Soon it came to clashes between the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa, led by Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa, and the Rin spungs pa. With the death of two of the most prominent figures of this noble house, namely Mtsho skyes rdo rje and Don yod rdo rje, Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa hoped to regain some of the influence lost previously. When the *sde srid* had found powerful allies, he attacked the Rin spungs pa and was victorious, taking even such a strategically important estate like Lhun po rtse at Chu shul. Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa succeeded in driving back the Rin spungs pa influence in Dbus, but it would be misleading to regard him at this point as the hegemonic power in this region. Several other parties like the 'Bri gung pa were also shaping the policy of that province.

Beside military confrontations, Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa also tried to increase his influence by supporting the Dge lugs pa. Undoubtedly, he did it in order to revive some of the former prestige, which the *dbang* Grags pa rgyal mtshan had as patron of this school and in order to back them as they were one of the known enemies of the Rin spungs pa.

'Gro ba'i mgon po (1508–1548), one of the two sons of Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa, was obliged to marry and to continue the family line. It seems that Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa, who was married to Legs mtsho rgyal mo, a daughter of the Rin spungs pa ruler Don yod rdo rje (1463–1512), wanted to avoid a conflict-laden situation as experienced by Kun dga' legs pa who was married to a Rin spungs pa wife and who was in open conflict with her and their son. Probably, this was the reason that in 1524 'Gro ba'i mgon po took the estate of Gong dkar as his residence. He married two wives. His first wife named Dung dkar ma came from the Skyid shod pa Dga' ldan pa. Another wife, who was from 'Phyong rtse, he took as his second wife. This became the base for two branches, which vied politically with each other for the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse.

It seems that at the beginning both wives lived at Gong dkar. At an unknown date Dung dkar ma together with her two sons moved to Skyor mo lung, which beside Sne'u gdong rtse, became the seat

of that branch during the rule of the *gong ma sde srid* Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa and partly also in later times. Consequently, in the historiographical literature both sons mostly figure as the scions (*gdung brgyud*) from Skyor mo lung. It seems that one of their supporters was the Pan chen Bsod nams grags pa, who, as it is well-known, acted also for some time as abbot of the monastery of Skyor mo lung. Furthermore both sons were preferred by their grand-father, the *gong ma sde srid* Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa, and enjoyed also the support of both, the Zhva dmar pa and the Zhva nag pa incarnations.

The elder of both sons was Bsod nams grags pa rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po (d.1566?), while the younger was Rnam rgyal rab brtan. One hears of the former for the first time in 1545, when the young Bsod nams rgya mtsho was brought to Skyor mo lung and later recognised as the 3rd Dalai Lama. Not much later, in 1549, when Bsod nams rgya mtsho received the *dge tshul* vows from the Pan chen Bsod nams grags pa, the young 'Bras spungs incarnate was invited by the *zhabs drung gdung brgyud rin po che* to come to Skyor mo lung. He accepted the invitation and gave him teachings. It looks as if Bsod nams grags pa rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po (d.1566?) was mostly staying at Skyor mo lung at that time and had strong links to the Dge lugs pa as his grand-father Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa had. The other line, that sprang from the wife from 'Phyong rtse, remained at Gong dkar. Her son was Ngag dbang grags pa (1532 to 1538–1603/04) and another whose name is not known and seemingly died young. The father of both of these figures, 'Gro ba'i mgon po, never achieved a position equal to that of his father, probably due to the fact that he died at the age of forty. Through him, however, the line that lived at Gong dkar developed a special relation to the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud, which became of great importance for the next decades.

The ambitious plans of Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa never did come to fruition. He got caught in the regionally fragmented power struggle and could not establish a supremacy in Dbus or even in Gtsang. The accident of 1554, when he was forced to abdicate the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse, was of far-reaching consequences for the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. The point of disagreement, the appointment of Yar klungs Bkra shis rtse pa as the new minister of the interior, should be regarded as an attempt by Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa to get rid of the influence of the well-established noble houses, which traditionally shaped the politics of Sne'u gdong rtse. It is noteworthy that the Skyid shod pa were the driving force in the consequent abdication of Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa. One can state that in some regards the situation reminds one of the Rin spungs pa. It looks as if the members of the noble house of Dga'ldan pa were hoping to usurp the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse by backing Ngag dbang grags pa. However, the installation of Ngag dbang grags pa was just an interlude. Due mainly to the help of the 'Bri gung pa, the former *sde srid* was able to regain his throne. It looked as if the Skyor mo lung line would justly follow him as *sde srid*, when suddenly the entire archive of Sne'u gdong rtse was taken by the Dge lugs pa, when Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa passed away.

Now the entire mode of succession was unclear. The Dge lugs pa favoured the ousted Ngag dbang grags pa of the Gong dkar branch, while both the Zhva nag pa and the Zhva dmar pa incarnations supported the Skyor mo lung branch. For several years no solution was found for this dilemma. The Rlangs Phag mo gru pa became the subject of negotiations between religious schools; one can surely regard this prolonged uncertainty as the main point that the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa vanished as a political entity of any more than local importance. The compromise that was eventually found with regard to succession left the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa a structurally weak entity, which was permanently fragmented into two branches, greatly limited in their economic power.

The different branches of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa continued to live separately in the 17th century – at Sne'u gdong rtse and at Gong dkar. This will be shown in detail in the 7th chapter of this study. The death of the *sde srid* Ngag dbang grags pa in 1603/04 did not change this situation. Contact between both branches of the family is not documented in the historiographical literature. Especially, the information on the Skyor mo lung line is regrettably scanty and allows one to sketch out only

roughly their political interests and activities. It seems that they occupied the throne of Sne'u gdong rtse and had seemingly an inclination to the Dge lugs pa, which was ultimately but not solely the cause that led them into conflict with the Gtsang *sde srid* rulers. The Gtsang pa troops overthrew them twice, once in 1613 and again in 1620. The latter victory seems to have been decisive and they fade out from the historiographical records.

The other branch of Gong dkar had in the mean time strengthened their ties to the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud and stayed in close contact with the Dge lugs pa and Karma pa dignitaries. They had escaped the destructive campaigns of the Gtsang *sde srid*, who had brought the majority of Dbus and Gtsang under their control. It looks as if the marginalisation of the Gong dkar branch in terms of military strength and regional political influence had paradoxically helped them to survive.

In 1625 they were forced to trade Gong dkar palace for that of Sne'u gdong rtse and by this they came into possession of their old estate. Their ancient position, however, could not be restored. They continued to endure the events of that period without any means to influence them. In the ongoing strife between the Dge lugs pa and the Gtsang *sde srid* they did not take a clear stand for either party but abstained from any involvement. It was artistic and religious interests which defined their existence but not politics, it seems. With the victory of the Dge lugs pa's and their allies they regained some of the ceremonial status that they had earlier enjoyed. The main reason for this was the fact that the 5th Dalai Lama attempted to establish a rule that would govern the religious as well as the secular sphere and had therefore to encompass elements and components of both.

Besides the acquisition of religious objects, which had formerly belonged to the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa and were of some importance for their historio-political value, the 5th Dalai Lama laid emphasis on the inclusion of the ceremonial heritage of this noble house. Foremost among this was the introduction of dances, which did not just shape the life of monasteries but of royal courts as well. It was in this field that the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa of that day had to offer a rich and prestigious tradition that in the 17th century was renewed and revised. The importance of that tradition as a model for royal prestige can be documented also in the past for the noble houses of 'Phyongs rgyas, Rin spungs and even the Gtsang *sde srid*, who borrowed from the court of Sne'u gdong rtse. In the 17th century this process continued and the rise of the Dga' ldan *pho brang* government as well as the young state of Bhutan, as Ardussi 2008 has shown, sent emissaries to Gong dkar and Sne'u gdong rtse in order to introduce those dances to their own respective monastic and courtly culture. It was in this regard that the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa had, for the last time, an importance that reached well beyond their own dominion.

This introduction of dances, which were handed down at Gong dkar and Sne'u gdong rtse should, however, not conceal the fact that, though elevated on the ceremonial side, the status of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was weak. With the consolidation of the Dga' ldan *pho brang* government the 'need' for a Phag mo gru pa noble house had become something that could be easily brushed aside. Moreover it had become anachronistic from the Dge lugs pa's perspective, who did not tolerate any rivals be they political or only ceremonial. The 5th Dalai Lama especially was convinced that the former glory of the Phag mo gru pa belonged exclusively to the past and had its relevance only as a historical analogy but not as a real entity. When internal differences troubled the Rlangs Lha gzig family the time had come to consider this noble house finished. The estate of Gong dkar was already in the possession of the Dge lugs pa administration after the defeat of the Gtsang *sde srid* (and to hand it over to the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was unthinkable for them). Later an affair concerning the *sde srid* Blo bzang mthu stobs was used as an opportunity to divide up the remaining estates between the *sde srid* of the Dga' ldan *pho brang* – the *sde srid* Blo bzang mthu stobs obtained Rtsed thang and not much later the *sde srid* Blo bzang sbyin pa got Sne'u gdong rtse. Even though the line of the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa was uninterrupted, their economic base had been taken away. They had become 'beggars' as the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705) put it triumphantly.

