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On the Unknown History of a Himalayan Buddhist Enclave: Spiti Valley before the 10th Century

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On the southwestern corner of the Tibetan Plateau lies a relatively remote river valley called Spiti. The Spiti Valley, especially its earliest human history, is well known among scholars of Tibetan Studies because of its close association with the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (*lo chen rin chen bzang po*), who is believed to have led a major campaign to spread Buddhism in Western Tibet starting in the late 10th century (Tucci 1933; Snellgrove 1957; Klimburg-Salter 1997). This campaign is known in the history of Tibetan Buddhism as the "Second Diffusion of Buddhism" into Tibet.[1] At that time, the rulers of the newly formed Guge Kingdom, of which Spiti was then a part, supported the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo in the construction of temples, monasteries and other structures, as well as the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into the Tibetan language. Spiti – and particularly Tabo Monastery (built in 996 A.D.) – was one of the key sites of these activities (Klimburg-Salter 1997). While research on Spiti's ancient Buddhist heritage and its association with the Second Diffusion of Buddhism has shed much light on the region during that time, scholars have not given adequate attention to Spiti's earlier period. Consequently, our knowledge of the history of the Spiti Valley dates back only to the 10th century (Lahuli 2002; Jahoda 2009). As a respected scholar from the region, Angrup Lahuli (*dngos grub ga sha pa*, Lahuli 2002: 80) has rightly noted that: "[T]he history of the Spiti Valley begins from the 10th century. There is no notable reference to the prior history of the region in any standard books or inscriptions."[2]

This paper aims to redress this scholarly gap by presenting the first study on the history of the Spiti Valley before the 10th century (referred to here also as Spiti's "early

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[1] According to the history of Tibetan Buddhism, the "First Diffusion of Buddhism" occurred during the Old Tibetan Empire (7-9th century). It is said that much of the Tibetan Buddhist heritage was destroyed after the last king of the Old Tibetan Empire came into power. Buddhism was reintroduced into Tibet starting from the late 10th century, which is known as the "Second Diffusion of Buddhism" into Tibet.

[2] Lahuli's actual words are: *Spiti ke itihas ka arambh 10 win shatabdi se hi mana jata hai. Is ka pragitihas kya raha is wishay men koi wishesh ullekh pramanik pustko ya abhilekho se uplabdh nahin hota* (2002: 80, transliteration based on the Hunterian system).

history"). It aims to contribute in three ways: 1) it presents a coherent set of four assumptions (drawn from Hindi, English and Tibetan language sources) regarding Spiti's early history, which are in turn confirmed by primary source materials and corroborated by field observations; 2) it examines the source (Hutchison & Vogel 1919; 1920a; 1933) of an argument that conjectures that Spiti was ruled by Hindu Sena kings in the 7th century; and 3) it contributes a hypothesis that Spiti's *khang chen* (Khangchen) system of taxation was modelled on the military administrative system of the Old Tibetan Empire (mid 7th century to mid 9th century).

Before presenting these contributions, a few words on the sources of Spiti's history are required. Main primary sources relevant to Spiti's early history include the petroglyphs, cave paintings and rock inscriptions of Spiti (such as those studied by Thakur 2000 & 2008) as well the old Tibetan documents from the time of the Tibetan empire (such as those studied by Uray 1960 & 1982; Takeuchi 2004; Dotson 2006; Iwao 2007; Dotson 2009). Secondary sources on Spiti's history mainly come from British colonial records dating from 1846 to 1947 (during this period, Spiti was a part of British India). These records contain the most extensive and detailed information about historical Spiti. Similarly, Spiti is also mentioned briefly in several Tibetan textual sources outlining the history of Tibetan religious kings and Buddhism in Tibet, as well as the history of Ngari, Guge and Ladakh, all of which ruled Spiti at different times. According to Shastri (2007), the earliest Tibetan language source material mentioning Spiti is the 13th century text, *lde'u chos 'byung* (discussed below). Important Hindi language references to Spiti include the Kulu annals (discussed below) and field observations of the region written by Rahul Sankrityayan (1994; 2002).[3] In addition to the numerous British colonial records on Spiti, some of the secondary sources on Spiti's history include Shuttleworth (unpublished: BL, OICC, Miss Eur. D722/25), Gergen (1976), Tobdan (1984), Tsetan (1987), Sankrityayan (1994), Lahuli (2002), Shastri (2007), Thakur (2008), Jahoda (2007, 2008 & 2009) Hutchison & Vogel (1921a & 1933), Bajpai (1987), Handa (1994), Ham & Stirn (1997), Kapadia (1999), Handa (2001), and Jhampa (2008-2010).

Four assumptions regarding Spiti's history before the 10th century

Although there is no primary source text directly referring to Spiti from before the 10th century, it is possible to draw four general assumptions about Spiti's early history based on

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[3] According to the *Lahul-Spiti* series of books (2002: 5; 2003: 13), publication by the Himachal Kala Sanskriti Bhasha Academy (Himachal Academy of Arts, Culture and Language), Rahul Sankrityayan visited Spiti's neigbouring regions of Kinnaur in 1926 and Lahul in 1933 and 1937.

the broader political and cultural history of the western Himalayan region and Tibet (e.g., *lde'u chos 'byungs*; *mkhas pa'i dga' ston*; Sankrityayan 1994; Petech 1997; Denwood 2008 & 2009). These assumptions are supported by primary textual sources (see, e.g., Dotson 2009). Well known to historians and scholars of early Tibet, these four assumptions are worth examining and will serve as a means to establish some basic points about Spiti's early history.

The four assumptions regarding Spiti's history before the 10th century are: (1) Spiti once formed a part of the ancient Zhangzhung (*zhang zhung*) kingdom; (2) the Zhangzhung kingdom, including Spiti, was annexed by the Tibetan empire in the 7th century; (3) the people of the Spiti Valley once spoke a different language (of Zhangzhung) from what they speak today (i.e., a Western Tibetan dialect); and (4) the people practised a different religion, which later became institutionalized as the Bon religion. These assumptions, which I discuss below, are widely held by regional (Indian and Tibetan) as well as by academic scholars,[4] and are supported by primary source manuscripts from the time of the Old Tibetan Empire as well as by early classical Tibetan historical texts. To some extent, these assumptions can also be corroborated by field observations, some of which will be discussed below.

Assumptions 1 and 2 are directly confirmed by primary textual sources from the time of the Old Tibetan Empire and supported by early (13th century) Tibetan language sources. For example, according to the Old Tibetan Annals, "a bureaucratic register of events [of the Old Tibetan Empire] … maintained more or less contemporaneously with the events it describes [from 650 to 765 AD]" (Dotson 2009: 9), the kingdom of Zhangzhung was conquered by the Tibetans by the mid seventh century.[5] Interestingly, the earliest Tibetan language source referring to Spiti, the 13th century religious history text *lde'u chos 'byungs*, describes Spiti (*spyi ti*) as a "little thousand district" of lower Zhangzhung of the Old Tibetan Empire.

Related to the first two assumptions are the next two, 3 and 4. According to Tobdan (1984) and Gyalpo (2006), the people who originally lived in this region are known as "Mon" in Tibetan. According to Sankrityayan (2002) and a local scholar, Tsering Dorje (interview, 16 October 2008), the same people are also referred to as "Kinnar-Kirat" in

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[4] Academic studies include Klimburg-Salter (1997), Petech (1997), Denwood (2008 & 2009), Dotson (2006 & 2009) and Iwao (2007). Tibetan language sources include Shastri (2007) and *lde'u chos 'byungs*, as cited by Dotson (2006 & 2009) and Iwao (2007). See Sankrityayan (1994) for Hindi language sources subscribing to these assumptions.
[5] According to the Old Tibetan Annals, by 644-645 AD, "all of Zhangzhung was subjugated and ruled" by the Tibetans (See, Dotson 2009: 82). According to Denwood (2008, 2009), Zhangzhung was fully captured by the Tibetans in 649, which was also the beginning of the reign of *Mang srong mang brtsan*.

Hindi and Sanskrit.[6] The Mon or the Kinnar-Kirat people are said to have had their own language[7] and religion (Tobdan 1984; Klimburg-Salter 1997). Although the pre-Buddhist religious practices of the region are commonly known as Bon, certain scholars have argued (see Dotson 2008 for a discussion on the topic) that the pre-Buddhist religious practices of the region were institutionalized and grouped together and labeled as "Bon" after the introduction of and in response to Buddhism. Similarly, Bon may have come to be associated with Zhangzhung at a later date. This does not mean that the practitioners of Bon did not exist before the 10th century. Records of Bon priests in ritual texts dating to the time of the Old Tibetan Empire also exist (as discussed by Dotson 2008). Similarly, traces of the Zhangzhung language and Bon religious symbols are found abundantly in Spiti.

That the people of Spiti practiced a non-Buddhist religion is clear from the many petroglyphs scattered around the Spiti Valley, but particularly in *lcog la yul gsum* or the three villages of Po, Tabo and Lari (Thakur 2000 & 2008). Many people have written about these (e.g., Francke 1914; Thakur 2000; Handa 2001). More recently, Thakur (2008) has presented an ethnoarchaeological study of these petroglyphs and argued that these belong to the pre-Buddhist religion of Zhangzhung. During my field research, I observed many of these rock inscriptions and petroglyphs, including a hitherto unmentioned set of drawings in the Mouth of Ogress cave (*srin mo kha gdang*) near Chichem Village. The noted Tibet archaeologist John Bellezza studied images of these drawings and identified them as predating the Old Tibetan Empire and as being non-Buddhist in character (personal communication, August 7, 2013). Important elements of Bon religious culture are also widely practiced in Spiti today – including mountain cults, the belief in serpent spirits (*klu*) and the piling up of ram horns as a way to ward off evil spirits. These practices are also practiced in other Himalayan regions.

Additional evidence that Spiti belonged to the Zhangzhung kingdom can be found in the local language. The local people of Spiti today speak a western Tibetan dialect mixed

[6] Within the Tibetan and Hindi languages, *Mon* and *Kinnar kirat* are used to refer to a people and culture that is broader than Western Tibet. For example, there are Mon people in Bhutan and in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Today, the local people in Spiti use the word "Mon" to refer to Indians in general. One scholar from the region (Tobdan 1984) considers his ancestors to be the "Mon" people. According to Tobdan, the Mons are a mixed Indian Tibetan race who lived between the Tibetan Plateau and the Indian plains. According to the Tibetan historian Gyalpo (2006), the western region of the Tibetan Plateau, including Ngari and Ladakh, were inhabited by the Mons before the establishment of Tibetan rule in the 10th century. However, the broader meanings associated with the "Mon" and "Kinner Kirat" people or cultures are different due to differences in Tibetan and Indian cultural and historical contexts.

[7] Their language is known as "*Zhangzhung gi skad*" in Tibetan (Tsering Dorje, interview, 16 October 2008) and "Shu bhasha" in Hindi and Sanskrit (Sankrityayan 1948/2006: 305).

with archaic elements including the use of Zhangzhung words. For example, although locals use a common Tibetan word (*chu*) for water, they also use a Zhangzhung word syllable (*ti*) for water (Sankrityayan 1948/2006: 305; Martin 2010). We see this in the name Spi-ti (*spyi ti*) and other locally used words such as *rzag ti* (used to refer to overflowing irrigation water from a full reservoir) and *ri ti* (mountain water). Sankrityayan (2002) and Dorje (personal communication) mention the existence of small pockets of rural communities in the neighbouring regions of Lahoul and Kinnaur where people also speak the archaic Kinnar-Kirat or Zhangzhung language.

Having presented these four assumptions regarding Spiti's early history, it is now necessary to consider a widely cited idea about Spiti's early history that does not cohere well with these assumptions. According to this widely published argument, in the 7th century, before it became a part of the Tibetan empire, Spiti was ruled by a dynasty of Hindu kings bearing the name "Sena".

On the veracity of the argument that "Sena" kings ruled Spiti in the 7th century

The argument that Hindu "Sena" kings ruled Spiti in the 7th century has been presented in numerous publications (e.g., Hutchison & Vogel 1921a & 1933/1994: 484; Gazetteer 1975: 40; Bajpai 1987: 16; Handa 1994: 34; Sankrityayan 1994: 384; Ham & Stirn 1997: 20; Handa 2001: 101-107; Sankrityayan 2002: 11; Him 2007: 94). This argument or idea is intriguing because there is no other connection between Spiti's early history and these Indian kings. It is necessary to examine the veracity of this argument because it does not fit well with the four assumptions presented above. More importantly, although Handa (2001) and Yadav (1972-73) have examined aspects of this argument, no one has heretofore critically examined all the key evidence of this argument.

In order to examine the argument, I trace the origin of the argument to Hutchison and Vogel's publications (1919; 1921a; 1933). I do so because these publications are the earliest published sources that link the Nirmand Copper Plate – a key piece of evidence in the argument – to Spiti being ruled by Hindu Sena kings in the 7th century. Moreover, they are also the most widely cited (especially Hutchison & Vogel 1933) source of the argument. Although Hutchison and Vogel (1919) warn that their argument is "only a conjecture" (p. 159), many scholars have adopted their arguments and evidences without entering into any examination of the actual materials. To Handa (1994: 34, and 2001: 101-107), as well as to Ham and Stirn (1997: 20), the evidence "indicates" that Spiti was under the rule of Hindu Sena kings in the 7th century. Even important government publications

such as the Himachal Pradesh District Gazetteer of 1975 suggests, based on the same pieces of evidence, that Spiti was "probably" ruled by Sena kings, while other scholars, such as Tobdan (1984: 32), Bajpai (1987: 16), Sankrityayan (2002: 11), S. C. Thakur (2002-03: 34) and Him (2007: 94), all present the idea as a matter of fact. Let us now examine the strength of the evidence behind the argument, particularly as presented by Hutchison and Vogel.

Hutchison and Vogel's two-volume study, *History of the Panjab Hill States* (1933), is one of the most cited works on the history of the region. Sections of this monograph were previously published separately in the *Journal of the Panjab Historical Society*, including a *History of Spiti* (1921a). The first publication that had references to this argument was in the "History of Kulu State", published in the *Journal of the Panjab Historical Society*, where they write (Hutchison & Vogel 1919: 159):

> "A pre-Buddhist Hindu dynasty with the surname of Sena is said to have ruled in Spiti in the early centuries of the Christian era, and Captain Harcourt states that coins with the *Sena* suffix on them have been found in the valley. These statements have not been verified, but if authentic the donor of the Nirmand plate may have been one of the Spiti Rajas. This, however, is only a conjecture."

Then, in the following year, in the same journal, Hutchison and Vogel (1920a: 134) published a "History of Spiti" which states:[8]

> "In very early times Spiti (pronounced Piti) was probably ruled by a Hindu dynasty of Rajas, bearing the surname or suffix of 'Sena'. Captain Harcourt states in his historical notes that coins of this dynasty have been found in the valley, but this has not been verified. In the possession of the Parasuram Temple at Nirmand in Outer Saraj is a copper plate deed granted by a Raja, Samundra-Sena, and assigned on paleographic grounds to the seventh century. Now this is just about the period when references to Spiti are found in the Kulu annals, and two Rajas of Spiti are mentioned by name bearing the Sena suffix. One of these, named Rajendar Sen, is said to have invaded Kulu and made it tributary, in the reign of Raja Rudar Pal, c. A.D. 600-650. Kulu remained tributary to Spiti for two reigns

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[8] The same text is also repeated in *History of the Panjab Hill States*: Vol. II (1933/1994, p. 484).

[until] Parsidh Pal gained a victory over Spiti in a battle near the Rothang Pass and thus secured the freedom of his country. Spiti and Chamba were probably allies in this invasion, which was made through Lahul, as also in the subsequent war in which Parsidh Pal was the victor. Spiti must at that period have been possessed of considerable resources, and it seems not improbable that the copper plate referred to may have been granted by one of the earlier Rajas, bearing the name Samundra Sena. Soon after the defeat by Prasidh Pal, Spiti was invaded by the Tibetans, and the pre-Buddhist Hindu dynasty was then probably overthrown. In this war Ladakh was aided by Sansar Pal of Kulu, and he received three villages in Spiti for his assistance, while the sons of Chet Sen the Spiti [King] were assigned a jagir."

Here, Hutchison and Vogel base their idea or argument on three disparate pieces of evidence: Captain Harcourt's notes, the Nirmand copper plate, and the Kulu annals. Below, I examine and comment on each of these pieces of evidence.

The copper plate belongs to a Hindu temple in Nirmand village of the Kulu district of Himachal Pradesh. It marks the granting of land (Susilagrama village) to a group of Brahmans by King Samudrasena. Several scholars (e.g., Mitra 1879; Cunningham 1882; Fleet 1888; Yadav 1972-73; Chauhan 1996) have closely studied the inscription. Two complete translations are available from Mitra (1879) and Fleet (1888). These studies, along with the two translations, show that Spiti is not mentioned in the inscription text. Nor is there any suggestion that the "Sena" kings alluded to in the inscription ruled Spiti. Yet, as mentioned above, many published works cite the copper plate as evidence arguing that Spiti was once ruled by "Sena" kings in the 7th century.

The Nirmand copper plate has no obvious inscription date and there is no scientific consensus regarding its age. Based on the fact that the letters are of "Gupa type", Mitra (1879: 212-213) estimated the copper plate to date from the fourth or fifth century A.D. Cunningham (1882: 120-121) argued that paleography alone is not a reliable method of dating since the Gupta type of letters are known to have been used in the Himalayan foothills well into the 19th century. Cunningham further argued that the inscription is dated and interpreted some of the inscription words as suggesting the year 1170 A.D., which, he argued, coincides well with the genealogy of the Sena dynasty kings of Mandi. However, both of these datings were rejected by Fleet (1888), who took cues from symbols in the inscription, and, based on paleographical grounds, concluded that the inscription "belongs roughly to about the seventh century A.D." (p. 287). Fleet's dating has been the most

influential. Yadav (1972-73) provided a thorough analysis of debates surrounding the Nirmand copper plate dating and whether the "Sena" kings mentioned in the inscription were rulers of Kulu, Mandi or Spiti. Like Cunningham, Yadav argued that paleographical grounds are not sufficient to fix the date of a particular inscription and that the identification of dating must also fit the chronology of those kings mentioned in the inscription. By tracing the genealogy of Mandi Sena kings to the founding of Suket in Bengal, Yadav suggested that the date of the Nirmand copper plate is around the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. (p. 86).

The lack of scientific consensus regarding the dating of the Nirmand copper plate, along with the absence of any reference to Spiti in the inscription text, makes the use of the Nirmand copper plate as evidence of the claim that the copper plate was granted by a king of Spiti in the seventh century somewhat questionable.

There is no debate or study on how the other two pieces of evidence (Captain Harcourt's notes and the Kulu Annals) relate to Spiti. Apparently, according to Hutchison and Vogel, Harcourt claims to have discovered the coins of Sena kings in Spiti, but unfortunately, Hutchison and Vogel do not provide a citation to for this claim. It is not mentioned in Harcourt's famous book, *Himalayan District of Kooloo, Lahaul and Spiti* (1871).[9] Nor have I encountered any studies on these coins. Nevertheless, even if we assume that coins bearing the name Sena were found in Spiti, it can be argued that there could be a number of ways in which such coins and items from different kingdoms could end up in Spiti. The Spiti Valley formed a trade route linking traders in (contemporary) India to those in Ladakh, Tibet and central Asia. It is possible that traders brought the coins into the valley. There is also the question of the dating of the coins, about which there is no information. Thus, based on current information, Harcourt's alleged statements about the coins cannot be accepted as a valid piece of evidence.

The third and final piece of evidence, the Kulu annals, is a genealogy of the kings of Kulu, provided by Harcourt (1871: 370-375), Lyall (1874: 106-114), Hutchison and Vogel (1919), and Bhatnagar (2007). Harcourt (1871), Lyall (1874), and Hutchison and Vogel (1919) are three of the earliest and main sources of the Kulu annals, and Bhatnagar (2007) represents a recent Hindi language publication that provides a detailed study of the annals based on all three sources as well as local sources. Ideally, for the purposes of this study, an original source that provides periodization of different kings should be analyzed. Unfortunately, no such source exists (Hutchison & Vogel: 130; Bhatnagar 2007: 26-28).

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[9] Strangely, Lahuli (2002) cites this book as the source of Harcourt's claim.

Harcourt does not provide any dating or descriptive detail about the early period of the annals that is of interest to the study. Similarly, Lyall's annals only begins from the later period (i.e., from 1500 A.D.), because he considered the earlier portion of the Kulu annals "wholly unreliable" (Hutchison & Vogel 1919: 131). According to Hutchison and Vogel (1919), "There is undoubtedly much confusion in the [Kulu annals], which weakens its reliability, more especially in the older portion dealing with the Pal dynasty, and for which we unfortunately possess little corroborative evidence of any kind" (p. 131). Similar views on sources and reliability are also expressed by Bhatnagar (2007), who has used Hutchison and Vogel (1919) as a key source of information, especially for the early portion of the Kulu annals.

If Hutchison and Vogel considered the Kulu annals unreliable and lacking evidence for the early period, what was the basis of their speculation that Spiti belonged to Sena kings in the 7th century? Let us first consider the two disparate references to Spiti Sena kings provided by Hutchison and Vogel: Harcourt's note that coins of Sena kings were found in Spiti and specific references, in the early portion of the Kulu annals, to Rajendar Sen and Chet Sen being kings of Spiti. I have already commented on Harcourt's notes on the coins above, so here I will only comment on the second reference. In addition to the authors themselves claiming that this is unreliable, the references to Spiti Hindu kings in the Kulu annals cannot be checked or confirmed for their historical veracity because: (a) the original source does not exist and (b), as far as I know, the idea of Hindu Sena kings of Spiti does not exist anywhere else outside the (references to) Kulu annals, which leaves little to no room for corroboration.

Hutchison and Vogel admit that their source material for the Kulu annals is "scanty and unreliable" (1919: 130). Their main source is Harcourt's unpublished historical notes, which were bequeathed to them by Harcourt before his death (Hutchison & Vogel 1919: 131). Harcourt's notes are unlikely to contain the 7th century Kulu Annals dating of Spiti because, if such a date had indeed been mentioned, Harcourt (1871) would have used it in his study, just as he had done for other periods. Besides, Hutchison and Vogel would have acknowledged Harcourt as the source, just as they had for the idea concerning the coins. How, then, did Hutchison and Vogel come up with the specific date of 600-650 A.D.?

A close examination of relevant publications in which Hutchison and Vogel have mentioned and provided links (footnotes) on the topic (1918; 1919; 1921a; 1921 b; 1933/1994) show a logical reasoning of their dating based on: (a) an assumption that the periodization of the Nirmand copper plate by Fleet (1888) is accurate, and (b) a speculation that the copper plate "may have been granted by one of the earlier" (see quotations above)

Sena kings of Spiti. The first assumption provided a concrete time period, i.e., "roughly to about the 7th century" (Fleet 1888: 287), but the text of the Nirmand copper plate, as mentioned earlier, contains no reference to Spiti whatsoever. Here, Hutchison and Vogel speculated that if Spiti was indeed ruled by Hindu Sena kings in the past, as indicated by the Kulu annals, then the King Samudrasena mentioned in the copper plate "may have been … one of the earlier" Sena kings of Spiti. Hence, the periodization of the 7th century can be further narrowed to the first half of the 7th century because, as mentioned by Hutchison and Vogel (and discussed above), the region was taken over by the Tibetans from the middle of that century.

Clearly, in order for the periodization (7th century) to be acceptable, both assumption (a) and speculation (b) must be correct. Hutchison and Vogel's reliance on Fleet's (1888) assessment of the copper plate's dating, which was then the most authoritative study, cannot be accepted now because, as discussed above, there is no scientific consensus regarding the dating of the Nirmand copper plate. In addition, the speculation that the king who granted the copper plate, Samudrasen, may have been a Spiti king also cannot be accepted because there are other theories about the identity of Samudrasen, most notably identifying him as a member of Mandi-Suket Sena dynasty of kings (Cunningham 1882; Yadav 1972). Furthermore, as pointed out by Yadav (1972: 79): "Vogel and Hutchison state that Kulu remained under the sovereignty of Spiti for only two reigns [….] It is noteworthy that the Nirmand copper-plate itself refers to four rulers and there is a possibility of more rulers having ruled here. Besides a ruler called Rajendrasena according to Vogel and Hutchison is supposed to have conquered Kulu. But his name is […] absent in the Nirmand copper-plate", making the claims doubtful. Therefore, we can conclude that Hutchison and Vogel's dating of 600-650 A.D. is implausible.

In addition, Sankrityayan (1994: 385) has expressed skepticism ("bhari sandhe" or literally, "heavy doubt") regarding the assumption that the Spiti Sena kings mentioned in the Kulu annals were Hindu kings. According to Sankrityayan, the suffix or last name "sena" could be Sanskrit/Hindi translations of the Tibetan name "*lde*", which was used for the kings of Guge. This is interesting because Guge and nearby kingdoms such as Zangskar, which had a dynasty of "Lde" kings, were founded in the late 10th century. Moreover, the Tibetan equivalent of "Sena" is "*sde*", not "*lde*". In any case, Sankrityayan may still be correct because both "Sde" and "Lde" have the same pronunciation and hence yield the possibility of such a translation. During my travels in the region, I found that it is common among people to have both Tibetan and Hindu names, a point which is also highlighted by Sankrityayan.

Having shown that the validity of the main pieces of evidence presented by Hutchison and Vogel are questionable, I will now move on to a different topic related to Spiti's early history: the socio-economic and military administration of Spiti during the Old Tibetan Empire.

Socio-economic and military administration of Spiti during the Old Tibetan Empire

Today, Spiti is regarded as a "pure" Tibetan Buddhist region (Rahula 2009: 9). When did the process of Tibetanization begin in the Spiti Valley? According to Klimburg-Salter (1997: 32-33), the Tabo Monastery inscriptions suggest that the time when the monastery was built (996 A.D.) represented the beginning of the Tibetanisation of the region:

> "Comparing the frequency of essentially non-Tibetan clan or place names associated with the monastic community recorded in 996 and the totally Tibetan names found in the later dGe-lugs-pa chronicle, the *Vaidurya ser-po,* one can appreciate the progressive Tibetanisation of the local culture."

This transformation, mainly in the religious culture and identity (names) of the people, was the result of an intensive missionary campaign to spread Tibetan Buddhism in the region that began from the time of the construction of the Tabo Monastery.[10] In this section, I suggest that the Tibetanization of Spiti, in terms of its institutional system of taxation, seems to have begun earlier during the time of the Old Tibetan Empire. In other words, I hypothesize that the origins of Spiti's Khangchen system of taxation and administration can be traced to the Old Tibetan Empire. I will show that there are striking similarities between the military and administrative (taxation) system of the Tibetan empire to that of Spiti's Khangchen system.

Before I present the different pieces of evidence and the arguments supporting this hypothesis, two important points should be stressed. First, this hypothesis is strictly applicable to Spiti; it is not pertinent to other Tibetan Buddhist regions. I point this out because similar taxation or administrative systems in other regions could have different origins; for example, Goldstein (1971: 14) has noted, in the case of Samada village in central Tibet, that a military service (*dmag khral*) system of taxation was introduced in the early eighteenth century during the time of *Mi dbang Pho lha nas.* Second, this hypothesis

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[10] For a more detailed account regarding the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the region during this period, see Klimburg-Salter, 1997; Tucci, 1935/1988.

only concerns the historical foundation of the *institution* of "250 soldiers" in the Spiti Valley, not the ethnic or geographic origins of the soldiers per se. This is important to point out because there are many instances of prehistoric cave art and petroglyphs in Spiti (Thakur 2000) that constitute evidence that the valley was inhabited much earlier on. Currently, there is no information concerning the issue of whether the original group of 250 soldiers was selected among people already living there or whether they were sent from elsewhere to guard the border region of Spiti.[11]

During my doctoral field research in Spiti, I learned that the traditional socio-economic structure of Spiti's villages is based on the absolute dominance of a group of households known as Khangchen, or more specifically, "Old Khangchen" (*khang chen rnying pa*). These households constituted the basic unit of production and taxation; hence the men of these households were also the legitimate tenants who enjoyed ownership rights to all village farming land and irrigation sources. Other groups of households, such as Dhutul (*dud 'thul*, which is similar to the *dud chung* households of Dingri described by Aziz 1978, and of Samada village described by Goldstein 1971) and outcaste groups (Gombo 1983), were dependent on the Khangchen households for work and food. Through membership at the Village Council or *'dun ma*, men of Khangchen households also enjoyed all legal and enforcement powers at the village level; Khangchen men served as the local militia or *dmag*. In return for these privileges, the Khangchen households were levied heavy taxes, hence they were also known as Treba (*khral pa* or "taxpayer"). The taxes were paid out mainly in the form of grains, corvee labor (Bray 2008), and military service (interviews 2007, 2008, 2010).[12]

There are several things that link Spiti's Khangchen system of taxation and administration to the Old Tibetan Empire. I will start by citing ancient Tibetan texts, which serve to demonstrate that Spiti formed a part of a military administrative district of the Tibetan empire. Then I will draw on academic studies based on primary textual sources from the time of the Tibetan empire (Uray 1960 & 1982; Takeuchi 2004; Dotson 2006; Iwao 2007; Dotson 2009). This will serve to highlight certain similarities in organizational structure and roles of households responsible for paying taxes under the Tibetan empire to

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[11] Although the local historian Tsetan (1987) says that the people of Spiti migrated from the neighbouring region of Guge (which became a kingdom from the 10th to the 17th century), he does not mention when they came. Additionally, while some scholars have argued that Tibetans migrated into the western Himalayan region (Denwood, 2008 & 2009), including the Spiti Valley (Thakur, 2000, Sankrityayan, 1994; 2002), during the time of the Tibetan empire, there is no information about the ethnic or geographic origins of the 250 soldiers.
[12] See Goldstein (1971) for an excellent discussion of taxation in Tibetan villages.

those of Spiti under the Ladakhi rule. I will also show how the similarities between the two taxation systems find support in local oral history, language, social customs, and military practices. I will conclude this hypothesis by cross checking the hypothesis within the broader regional historical contexts.

A Little Thousand-District of Two Hundred and Fifty Soldier-Households

The earliest known reference to the name "Spiti" (*spyi ti*), as well as to the existence of an administrative structure in Spiti, comes from a 13th century Tibetan text, *lde'u chos 'byung* (Shastri 2007). In *lde'u chos 'byungs,* Spiti (*spyi ti*) is identified as a "little thousand-district" (*stong bu chung*) of lower Zhangzhung of the Old Tibetan Empire. The passage, as quoted by Dotson (2006: 162), Iwao (2007: 212) and Shastri (2007: 59) says:

> *"Bod dang sum pa'i so mtshams na/ zhang zhung smad kyi stong sde lnga yod de/gug ge gu cog gnyis/ spyir rtsang yar rtsang gnyis/ spyi ti stong bu chung dang lnga'o".*

This passage may be translated as:[13]

> In the border region between Tibet and Sumpa, there are five thousand-districts of the lower Zhang-zhung. These are Gu-ge, Gu-cog, Spyir-tsang, Yar-rtsang and a little thousand-district of Spyi-ti.

A similar passage referring to Spiti as being part of the administrative district of the Tibetan empire is also provided in *mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (p. 189):

> *"Bod dang sum pa'i mtshams na gug ge cog la gnyis spyi gtsang yar gtsang gnyis ci di stong bu chung ste zhang zhung smad kyi stong sde lnga".*

This passage may be translated as:

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[13] Iwao (2007: 212) presents a similar translation.

In the border of Tibet and Sumpa, the two, Gu-ge and Cog-la, the two, Spyi-tsang and Yar-tsang, and the little thousand-district of Ci-di (Spiti) are the five thousand-districts of lower Zhangzhung.

The Old Tibetan Empire was divided into various regions such as "the four horns" (ru bzhi) of central Tibet, Sumpa, and Zhangzhung, which were made up of units of thousand-districts. During the Old Tibetan Empire, "thousand-districts" (*stong sde*) were the "fundamental units" (Uray 1982: 545) of military and economic administration (Takeuchi 2004; Iwao 2007; Dotson 2006 & 2007). A thousand-district was comprised of a thousand households, which were collectively responsible for supplying a thousand soldiers, i.e., one soldier from each household (Dotson 2009: 39). Based on the information provided in these passages, it is possible to deduce that Spiti was not only a part of the Old Tibetan Empire but that it also provided taxes, including one soldier from each of the one thousand tax-paying households. Below I share some reasons to support the hypothesis that Spiti's Khangchen system of taxation and administration is a remnant of 'Spiti, the little thousand-district of the Old Tibetan Empire', as mentioned in *lde'u chos 'byungs* and also in the 16th century text *mkhas pa'i dga' ston*.

Before I discuss some similarities between the administrative systems of Spiti's Khangchen household and that of the Tibetan empire, I will first clarify that the two differently spelled names for Spiti in *lde'u chos 'byung* and *mkhas pa'i dga' ston* refer to the same region. Shastri (2007) discusses the different spellings used for Spiti in Tibetan language sources. These include *spyi ti, spi ti, pi ti* and *ci di*. Many writers believe that the authentic spelling is *spyi ti*, which is also consistent with the spelling in the oldest Tibetan language source, *lde'u chos 'byung* (see, Shastri 2007; Gergan 1976; Rossi 2002: Jhampa 2008-2010; Tsetan 1987). An important reason for the lack of a standardized spelling is that most Tibetan language readers will pronounce *spyi ti* as "Chi ti" or *ci ti*, according to the central Tibetan system of pronunciation, whereas locally it is known as "pi ti". The people of Spiti do not pronounce the (superscribed) "*s*". The same is (often) true of the (subscribed) "*y*" (signs) in Tibetan texts (Jhampa 2008-2010). Thus, if we take out "*s*" and "*y*" from *spyi ti,* we are left with "*pi ti*", the local pronunciation. The lack of standardized Tibetan spelling for Spiti can also be seen between the local monasteries: Kee Monastery uses *spyi ti* in its publications (Tsering 2000), whereas Tabo Monastery uses *spi ti* on its website. Thus it is safe to conclude, as others cited above have done, that the references to

"spyi ti" in *lde'u chos 'byung* and "ci di" in *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* are both references to Spiti, especially since there are no other places in the region with the same name.

Functional similarities: Khangchen households as military regiments

The Old Khangchen (*khang* = house, *chen* = big) households are a group of households that are regarded as the founders or oldest members of the village.[14] That is why these households are also called Old Khangchen Households (*khang chen rnying pa*). These households were also referred to as "tax payers" (*khral pa*) because only this group of households was historically responsible for paying taxes to the state.[15] The farming estates of these households formed the basic unit of agricultural production and taxation which characterized the traditional economy. As taxpayers, these households – or, more specifically, the men of these households – had legal rights to all the cultivated land and irrigation sources of the village. How did the Khangchen households come to own all the local resources and decision-making powers, and how did the Khangchen household system maintain continuity?

According to common belief, the Khangchen households have privileged ownership over all farming land and irrigation water because they are the agnatic descendants of the oldest households of the village. Locals believe that there were a total of 250 such households in the beginning, which were known as the "250 soldiers" (or "*dmag phed rang gsum bgrya*",[16] Interviews, 2010, 2011). The old Khangchen households of today thus represent the agnatic descendants of the 250 soldiers. Even today, these households are often referred to as "*dmag*" in certain contexts (discussed below). Local elders mentioned that these 250 Khangchen households still exist and that the number has not changed much over time, if at all. George Trebeck (Moorcroft & Trebeck 1841: 71), one of the first Westerners to visit Spiti, mentioned that there were 267 of these

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[14] Another definition of Khangchen is the house of the eldest brother or son, the person responsible for running the farming estate. When the eldest son marries and takes charge of running the farming estate, his parents (often with an aunt or younger sister) retire into a Khangchung (*Khang* = house, *chung* = small). Carassco (1959: 32), along with British colonial records, mention yet another household, the Yangchungpa ("still-smaller-one"), where the members of Khangchung move if/when their grandson becomes head of Khangchen and their son must move into the Khangchung.[14] Khangchung and Yangchung households are thus extended parts of the Khangchen household.

[15] Taxes included grains, corvee labor and military service. However, these taxes were abolished or exempted by the Indian government.

[16] "*dang po dmag phed rang gsum bgrya byung pa red zer gyi 'dug*". Here, "*phed*" is the local pronunciation for "*phyed*" or half. I am not sure about the correct spelling of "*rang*" but most probably, it is "*dang*", which would render the statement as "*dang po dmag phyed dang sum brgya byung pa red zer gyi 'dug*". The expression "half less than 300 hundred (*phyed dang sum brgya*) is consistent with classical Tibetan expressions such as "*sde pa phyed dang brgyad*" for "half less than eight sets" of four alphabets, making up the 30 alphabets in the Tibetan language.

households in 1821. During my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, I travelled to all the villages in Spiti and collected data on the total number of Old Khangchen households in each village, which totalled 269.[17]

According to an elder from Spiti's Hansa village (interview, November 5, 2011), the Old Khangchen households are also known as "*dmag*" (meaning: "army" or "soldiers") because each of these households was once required to provide a soldier in times of war. The claim that Spiti men were obliged to go to Ladakh to serve as soldiers in war is supported by British records and by several stories I heard from separate interviewees.[18] For example, Trebeck (1841: 64), wrote that "[e]very family [or household] subject to taxes possesses a matchlock, a sword, and a bow and arrows," a statement which certainly suggests that the men of these households did indeed serve as soldiers. During my fieldwork, I found that only some of the Khangchen households still possessed such ancestral weapons, as many had either sold or lost them.

Another piece of local evidence linking Khangchen households to soldiery is found in a local tradition about the gathering of the men of Khangchen households, which is referred to as Mag Zom (*dmag 'dzom* or "gathering of soldiers"). During my fieldwork, I heard several references to meetings of Spiti's Khangchen household representatives as the "gathering of soldiers". Meetings are generally convened when there is an infringement of traditional customs or a threat posed to their power privileges. In one instance, a "gathering of soldiers living above Sheela creek" was held in 2007 to discuss how to deal with caste members who had admitted their children into Buddhist monasteries, despite this being against the custom (Tsering & Ishimura 2012). A more recent "gathering of soldiers" was brought together as a show of force to challenge Kaza villagers, affiliated with Tengyud Monastery, who had earlier challenged the sale of a piece of land in the village for use by the head lama of Kee Monastery. A third meeting was held a few decades ago to deal with certain Dhutul household men who were conspiring to challenge Spiti's system of

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[17] There were several known cases in the historical memory of villagers that explained how the numbers had increased. In some villages, the numbers had increased by fissioning off rich Khangchen households. In others, the number had increased after a Dhutul farmer bought land from the village and thus joined the ranks of Khangchen householders.

[18] One of these stories, for instance, provides a theory as to why Spiti celebrates their new year earlier than the traditional Tibetan new year. According to the theory, in one particular year, the men of Spiti were summoned by the king of Ladakh to fight a war. The timing of the situation was such that the men were unlikely to return by the new year, if they were to return at all. In order not to miss the celebrations, and for whatever other reasons, the people of Spiti decided to celebrate the new year months before the actual new year. Since that time, as the story/theory goes, Spiti's new year came to be celebrated in the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. There are, however, two other theories as to why Spiti celebrates their new year in the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. See Tsering & Jhampa, 2011.

primogeniture in the Indian court of law. In all three of these instances, the will or the power of the "soldiers" prevailed. These instances are relevant here not only because the men of Khangchen households are *called* "soldiers" but also because these customary gatherings *functioned* as a show of force. The tone in which the stories were narrated to me, especially when references were made to the "gathering of soldiers", implied that there could have been violence if the other party had not given in.

Having established that Spiti's Khangchen households were known as and functioned in practice as a regiment in its obligation and solidarity, I will now move on to arguments that link Spiti's administrative system, as well as some other aspects of local culture to those of the Tibetan empire of the 7th-9th century. I will first describe the structural similarities between Spiti's Khangchen administrative system and the Tibetan empire's military administrative system.

Similarities in administrative organizational structure of Tibetan empire and Spiti

Spiti's traditional administrative divisions were comprised of five subdistricts or subunits. Each of these districts was comprised of a group of fifty Khangchen households. In other words, the original two hundred and fifty soldier households were divided into "five groups of fifty households" (known as *lnga bcu lnga*), each constituting an administrative district or unit. Spiti's five groups are Upper (*stod*), Middle (*bar*), Lower (*sham*), Pin (*spin* or *sprin*, a tributary of Spiti river) and the Religious Estates (*chos gzhis*). Similarly, according to Tsuguhito Takeuchi (1994) and Brandon Dotson (2007), the Tibetan empire of the 7th-9th centuries was also organized into subunits of fifty soldier households, known as *tshan*.

The only issue with the five subunits of Spiti is that the Religious Estates subunit may not have existed during the time of the Tibetan empire because the oldest monastery of Spiti, Tabo, was built in 996 A.D. According to Tibetan tradition, the main development of monasteries took place during the second diffusion of Buddhism. Here, I would argue that this does not necessarily mean that the fifty taxpaying households were created anew with the institution of the Religious Estates. It is more likely that the fifty households existed before that time as a subunit group of taxpayers, which was regrouped later as the Religious Estates. This is because the basis of taxation and the administration of households is the farming land. As was mentioned above, all the farming land and irrigation sources in Spiti belonged to the taxpayers. In order to institute fifty new taxpaying households, these households must be given new farming land. This would most

likely also entail finding new irrigation sources and building canals, which would have required a tremendous investment of resources from the state/kingdom, especially given the fact that there were many more and larger monasteries in the kingdom of Guge.[19] Instead, it is more likely that the already existing taxpayers were assigned to different monasteries for their support.

Additionally, the Tibetan empire organized its administrative divisions according to geographical locations (Uray 1982: 545), which is also consistent with the administrative organization of Spiti. With the exception of the Religious Estates subunit, all other administrative subunits of Spiti are neatly grouped according to geographical locations: Upper (Spiti), Middle (Spiti), Lower (Spiti) and Pin (River Valley). In the case of the Religious Estates subunit, all but two villages are neatly clustered together along the upper Spiti River.[20]

In addition to the structural and functional similarities between the two administrative systems mentioned above, there are also other interesting similarities. These include the use of certain terms or language and mountain top fire-raising stations that are recorded in textual sources from the time of the Tibetan empire. There are also other factors, such as the fort-like architectural design of the villages that again hint at their military past, and social customs of inheritance that are believed to have been written during the time of the Tibetan empire. After discussing these points, I will corroborate this hypothesis by considering how it fits into the broader regional historical context.

Council meetings (*'dun ma*) of Spiti and the Tibetan empire

The local language or dialect of Spiti uses many words that are called *brda rnying* or "archaic words" by speakers of the central Tibetan dialect. These archaic words are found in Tibetan texts or used only in honorific form for sacred objects or in religious contexts among speakers of the central Tibetan dialect. For example, one of the most common

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[19] According to local belief, the builder of the Tabo Monastery, Rinchen Zangpo, built a total of 108 temples in different parts of the kingdom.

[20] The two villages that are not clustered with other villages of the subunit are Lithang and Tabo. Lithang, situated in the middle of Spiti, was comprised of two subunits: Religious Estates *and* Lower Unit (*sham*). Lithang farmers paid taxes to both the monasteries and to the state (see, e.g., Appendix I of Gazetteer, 1897, for a list of distribution of villages into different administrative units). As for Tabo village, there is an interesting local story I heard at Kyomo Village, which is also part of the Religious Estate unit. Seven households from Kyomo village pay tax to Tabo Monastery even though the village and the monastery are located at opposite ends of the valley. I was told by a villager that the reason for this is that the monastery was originally planned for construction at Kyomo but was later built at Tabo. I was also told that ruins of the initial monastery are still visible at Kyomo.

expressions of courtesy in Spiti is to invite someone for tea: "*ja thung byon*" (in which *ja* is 'tea', *thung* is 'drink' and *byon* is 'come'). *Ja* and *thung* are common Tibetan words used regularly in the colloquial central Tibetan dialect. *Byon*, however, is not used in colloquial Tibetan. It is used occasionally in the context of sacred religious items, as a marker of high respect, or for auspicious occasions. As a native speaker of the central Tibetan dialect, one of the only times I have heard the word *byon* used during casual conversation outside Spiti was once on the part of my mother. My mother, who was born and raised in the central Himalayan regions near the current border of Nepal and Tibet, used the word "*byon*" once to say that my father's hand-held prayer wheel "spins" very well.[21] I present this example to contextualize one such archaic word that is used commonly in Spiti, which also has the same usage in original source documents of the Tibetan empire.

An interesting archaic word that links Spiti to the time of the Tibetan empire is *'dun ma*. In the local Spiti language, the village council meetings are called *'dun ma*. This word is rarely used in the central Tibetan dialect, even less so to mean "meeting". What is interesting in the case of Spiti's usage of the word is that a similar and common usage is found in the Old Tibetan Annals, Tibet's oldest extant historical record dating to the time of the Tibetan empire (Dotson, 2009). The Old Tibetan Annals is a document written by the court historiographers of the Tibetan empire, chronicling the main bureaucratic and administrative activities of the kings and ministers of the Tibetan empire. In this text, the word *'dun ma* is used at least 35 times to refer to the 'council meetings' of the ministers and soldiers.[22] Considering the military regiment character of the Khangchen men and that the Village Council meetings (*'dun ma*) were traditionally only represented by Khangchen men, the contextual usage and meaning of the word is strikingly similar to those found in the Old Tibetan Annals. Thus in the context of the proposed hypothesis, the use of the word *'dun ma* for village council in Spiti seems to be a remnant of administrative terminology belonging to the military administrative system of the Tibetan empire, referring to a 'council meeting' of military officials.

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[21] She said: *pa lags kyi thug rje chen po yak po byon gyi 'dug.* Here *thug rje chen po* (literally 'the Great Compassionate One') refers to the prayer wheel, *yak po* is 'good', *byon* is 'spin' and *gyi 'dug* represents 'is'.
[22] The word *'dun ma* is mentioned in records of the Old Tibetan Annals for the following A. D. years: 673-674, 674-675, twice in 681-682, twice in 682-683, 684-685, twice 694-695, 695-696, 698-699, 701-702, 702-703, twice in 704-705, twice in 706-707, 707-708, 708-709, 709-710, 710-711, 711-712, 714-715, 715-716, 717-718, 722-723, 723-724, 727-728, twice in 728-729, 730-731, 732-733, 733-734, 734-735, and 761-762 (Dotson 2009). This is excluding the use of a shortened version of the word, the syllable *'dun*, which is also used many times in the text.

Fire-raising stations: a military alert system in Spiti and the Tibetan empire

Several elders who spoke to me about Spiti's early history mentioned that there are a few fire-raising stations on strategically chosen mountains tops; it is said that these stations once functioned as an alert system. According to local oral history, designated firemen (*so pa*) would light huge fires at these mountaintop structures as a means to send a signal to other parts of Spiti whenever Spiti was under attack by other armies or militia. These fire-raising stations were located at specific sites, namely those that could be seen from distant villages. Designated firemen would in turn light up their fire-raising stations as a way to signal villages on the other side of the mountains, until all of the villages in the Spiti Valley had been informed.

The mountaintop fire-raising stations are relevant to this hypothesis because the Old Tibetan Annals contain three separate references to them (see Dotson 2009). The first instance is most interesting. According to the Annals, in the summer of the year of the dog (674-675 A.D.), the emperor resided in Zrid. At that time, Spiti's neighboring region of Lcog-la, which is the same place as Gu-cog of *lde'u chos 'byung* and Cog-la of *mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (see above), revolted against the empire and the emperor departed to Tshang-bang-na. At this time the council meeting (*'dun ma*) was convened, which took account of the fire-raising stations (see Dotson 2009: 205). The second instance alluded to in the Annals is recorded in the year of the hare (691-692 A.D.). In this case, the council convened at Sky Bra-ma-tang and made a selection of fire-raising stations (Dotson 2009: 97). Then, in the year of the bird (709-710 A.D.), the council (*'dun ma*) convened at 'On-chang-do, where they took account of the fire-raising stations of Rulag. These three references to the fire-raising stations in the Old Tibetan Annals, especially the first reference of 674-675, give strong indications that Spiti's fire-raising stations are a remnant of the Tibetan empire's alert system. There is, however, one problem with to this idea.

Tsetan (1987) provides the only published account of Spiti's fire-raising stations. Tsetan (1987: 35) does not mention anything about the time of the Tibetan empire but refers to the fire-raising stations as evidence of a period when Spiti became a target of frequent attacks and robberies from its neighboring regions; Spiti had become such a target because the rulers of Guge and Ladakh did not pay attention to it because of its remoteness. According to Tsetan, these circumstances – Spiti being left without protection and under the mercy of frequent attacks – necessitated the building of these "small houses on top of mountains, called So-sa, the ruins of which still exist" (p. 35). According to Tsetan, when these structures were lit up, people of Spiti were required to go in the direction of the fire

with bows, arrows, swords, spears and other weapons to fight against the intruders. Thus, despite Tsetan's different idea regarding the origin of Spiti's fire-raising stations, his description of the function of these structures as a part of an alert system is similar to those provided by my informants and as indicated in the Old Tibetan Annals. As for Tsetan's later periodization of the building of Spiti's fire-raising system, it is not unlikely that the people referred to by Tsetan were rebuilding an *older* alert system.

There are several other aspects of Spiti that could be connected to the Tibetan empire. I will briefly mention two of these examples just to note that these exist. These include the system of corvee labor that existed in Spiti during Ladakhi and British times (Bray 2008; Gazetteer 1883) and also during the time of the Tibetan empire (Dotson 2009). Corvee labor was one of the many forms of taxation, along with military service (discussed above) and payment of grains, that tax-paying (*khral pa*) households were customarily obligated to contribute since the time of the Tibetan empire. Another aspect of local custom that seems to have originated during the time of the Tibetan empire is the system of inheritance based on patrilineal descent and primogeniture, along with certain legal mechanisms to keep the family lands intact. According to Rebecca French (1990), these legal practices were "recorded as early as the period of the Tibetan empire in the eighth century" (p. 470). While I have not been able to locate any textual evidence of these specific legal records mentioned by French, I did observe in the Old Tibetan Annals that the Chief minister, Mgar Stong-rtsan of the Tibetan empire, wrote the texts of the laws [supposedly for the empire] in the year of the hare, i.e., 655-656 A.D. (see Dotson 2009: 85). Instead of listing any more examples[23] that may not add to the validity of the hypothesis any more than what has already been presented above, I will now end this section by analyzing when the Khangchen system of Spiti could have been established from a broader historical perspective.

Cross checking the hypothesis with regional history

One method of checking when the system could have been established in Spiti is to consider all the kingdoms, empires and states that ruled the region and eliminate those that are unlikely to have introduced it. Since Spiti's Khangchen system is based on Tibetan

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[23] Yet another example is the fort-like architectural design of Spiti villages. The houses of Kibber, for example, were traditionally very close or attached to each other and the whole structure was built such that there were only three entrances with heavy gates that could be shut to keep intruders out. In other words, the village, according to a leader among Khangchen men of Kibber (Interview, 13th October 2010), was a military fort (*mkhar*). In the interview, both the Tibetan word *mkhar* and the Hindi word *kila* were used to describe the historical housing structure of Kibber village.

administrative laws and customs, we need only consider the Tibetan kingdoms and empires that ruled Spiti, which leaves us with five options: the Tibetan Empire (7th - 9th century AD); Guge (late 10th - 1630); Ladakh (from 1634-1683/84, and again, from 1758-1842); Tibet (1683/84-1787); and Purig (1734-1758).[24] From this list, we can eliminate Tibet (1683/84-1787) because the period of rule (3 or 4 years) is too brief. We can also eliminate Purig (1734-1758) because the period of rule, 20 years, is still too brief to have introduced a lasting system of socio-economic administration. In addition, as Jahoda (2009) points out, Purig's rule over Spiti was most likely only nominal: "One can assume, however, that, as in later times when Spiti was under the authority of the kings of Ladakh, the functionaries of [Purig] were rarely present in Spiti and that the immediate exercise of his power was confined to the collection of the collective total sum of revenues" (p. 46).

After eliminating Tibet and Purig from the Tibetan (Buddhist) kingdoms and empires that ruled Spiti, we are left with three powers that lasted for centuries: the Tibetan empire, the Guge kingdom, and the Ladakh kingdom. Among these three powers, one can assume that the later kingdoms of Guge and Ladakh adopted or modeled their system of administration on earlier rule (i.e., that of the Tibetan empire) because there is no record of establishment of a new administrative system in Spiti under Guge and Ladakhi rules. Moreover, as demonstrated earlier, the Tibetan empire had established an administrative system that was similar to Spiti's Khangchen system before the Guge and Ladakhi kingdoms had been formed.

Conclusion

The Spiti Valley has a relatively coherent history from the late 10th century, after the formation of the Guge kingdom. However, there is a paucity of literature that deals with Spiti's history before the 10th century. This paper contributes to this gap in scholarly knowledge in three ways.

First, by drawing on the history of the broader region from Tibetan, English and Hindi language sources, the paper presented a set of four assumptions about Spiti's early history. While these assumptions do not represent an original contribution, they are generally accepted as historical facts representative of the broader region. I have attempted

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[24] The dates are based on Jahoda (2009).

to explicate and qualify this set of assumptions for the purposes of this paper because there is hardly any published material on the history of Spiti before the 10th century, let alone any consensus. Hence, this set of assumptions is an attempt to use broader historical knowledge of the region to explicate the early history of the Spiti Valley. Since these assumptions are related to each other, we can present them in the form of a simple narrative. According to these assumptions, Spiti once formed a part of the kingdom of Zhangzhung, before it was annexed to the expanding Tibetan empire in the 7th century. During or before that time, the people of Spiti spoke a non-Tibetan language and practiced a non-Buddhist religion.

Second, I examined an intriguing argument about Spiti's early history that does not fit well with the assumptions presented above. Since a substantial number of publications subscribe to this argument (i.e., that Hindu "Sena" kings ruled Spiti before it became a part of Tibetan rule in the 7th century), I traced the argument to its original published source and analyzed the key pieces of evidence presented in that source. I argued that the evidence – especially the Nirmand copper plate, which is most cited and the only link to a specific period (7th century) – is questionable. While this examination does not falsify the argument, it points to the importance of critically examining these claims before accepting them as facts.

Third, I hypothesized that Spiti's Khangchen system of taxation and administration were modeled on the military administrative system of the Tibetan empire. Drawing on classical Tibetan texts and studies based on original source materials from the time of the Tibetan empire, as well as field research observations and interviews with locals, I presented several striking similarities between the military administrative system of the Tibetan empire and the traditional Khangchen system of Spiti. These similarities include organizational structure, functional roles, language usage, social customs, military practices, and others. While none of the similarities can alone substantiate the hypothesis, all of these similarities must be considered together within the regional historical context. As I demonstrated, if we consider all of the Tibetan powers that ruled Spiti, the Tibetan empire is the most plausible power that established the Khangchen system of administration in Spiti. This original hypothesis has implications not only for Spiti's early history but also for its contemporary society. It provides a definite historical period and

context for the privileged powers of Spiti's old Khangchen households as the sole group of farmers who own all of the traditional fields and irrigation sources of the village.

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