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A Portrait of BARAWA GYALTSEN PELZANG (1310-1391)

by Amy Heller

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Fig. 1: Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang (1310-1391)
Pigments and gold on cotton
99 x 81 cm
West Tibet, 15th century
Private Collection, Europe
Photo : Courtesy of Carlo Cristi

This thangka represents the eminent monk Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang ('ba' ra pa rGyal mtshan dPal bzang) and his lineage. Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang is portrayed in full monastic robes with the distinctive hat of the Drukpa Kagyu monks. (Fig. 1) The central panel of his hat has the precious flaming jewel (nor bu rin po che), which is a symbol of his prestigious status. The flaming jewel is the emblem of the Chakravartin, the universal sovereign of Buddhism, who is deemed capable of seeing and obtaining everything. Associated with wealth, increase of prosperity and good health, this flaming jewel is a symbol of wish-fulfillment and accomplishment in the widest sense. This reflects how Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang was revered by his students and later generations as a charismatic teacher of Buddhist doctrine and as a mystic, an accomplished master who composed spiritual songs during his meditations.[1] He is portrayed like a Buddha, his right hand making the bhumisparsha gesture of touching the earth to show his complete accomplishment of enlightenment and his left hand holding a Tibetan book, enclosed within cloths and a special gold clasp, in his lap. This book is chosen as his emblem because Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang was a prolific author whose collected teachings comprise fourteen volumes of specific teachings primarily for his monastic disciples. In addition, for both the monastic disciples and the lay Buddhist practitioners, he composed his autobiography accompanied by a selection of his spiritual songs. In the latter part of his lifetime, during the late 14th century, such texts circulated only as manuscripts. It was so inspirational that one of his disciples, the monk named Nam mkha' rgya mtsho, penned a eulogy of prayer to Barawa as a supplemental conclusion prayer to the autobiography and mystic songs. In 1540, at the time of the first printed edition of the autobiography and songs, Nam mkha' rgya mtsho's devotional prayer was considered so important that it was integrated into the autobiography and mystic songs as the conclusion for the volume and thus included in all further printings. The first printed edition was produced in 1540 at an important hermitage in Gungthang, the principality of western Tibet southwest of Sakya en route towards Nepal.[2] Nam mkha' rgya mtsho is prominently represented in the present thangka, indicative of his importance in relation to Barawa for later generations.

It is striking that there are name inscriptions for almost all the subsidiary figures but not for the three central portraits of the large Drukpa monk and his two principal disciples. This indicates that these three figures were so well known at the time of production of the thangka that they were immediately recognized - their names were deemed superfluous, thus not inscribed. In the case of the spiritual lineage of the upper register, comprising the monks and mahasiddhas and mystics of the Drugpa Kargyu monastic school, all the names are inscribed. In the upper register, from left to right, they are:

Lingrepa Pema Dorje (1128-1188) dressed in mystic's white robes with meditation strap,

Gampopa, the monk who was Milarepa's closest disciple (1079-1153)

Marpa, the translator who taught Milarepa (1012-1097)

Tilopa, the mahasiddha who was the forerunner of the Kagyu teachings and teacher of Naropa (? 988-1069?)

Vajradhara, the primordial Buddha

Naropa, the mahasiddha who taught Marpa (? 956-1040?)

Milarepa, Tibet's most famous mystic (1040-1153), dressed in white robes and red meditation strap,

Pamodrupa (1110-1170), the monk disciple of Gampopa, revered as founder of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and teacher of Lingrepa.

Tsang pa rgya ras (1161-1211) student of Lingrepa and founder of the Drukpa sub-school within the Kagyu teachings.

The monks of the lateral borders are the disciples of the lineage of Lingrepa and Tsangpa rgya ras (who are shown at the far left and far right of the upper register), again with names inscribed:

The lineage continues at upper left, below Lingrepa, with Gotsangpa 1189-1258, the monk disciple of Tsangpa rgya ras, who was the founder of the Druk monastery in central Tibet.

On the opposite side of the painting, below Tsangpa rgya ras, the rightmost figure of the upper register, is Ngering deleg (1225-1281), the disciple of Gotsangpa,

Below these two, continuing the left and right lateral borders, there are depicted many monks, some of whose names remain only partially legible ([see diagram](#)), who likely comprise the further distinctive historic lineage of a specific monastery.

Seated toward the center near Gotsangpa is a large white mahasiddha, wearing short red dhoti and red meditation strap, his hair in a chignon atop his head. His name is inscribed but it is impossible to identify him at present: Kyung Ga la grjang (?). Beside this mahasiddha, there are Samvara (blue) Nairatma (red) as meditation deities.

On the opposite side of the throne, is Vajrayogini, the red dancing dakini, also as a meditation deity. Beside Vajrayogini, there is a large portrait of a seated monk, larger in scale than any of the other subsidiary figures of the lineage. This monk holds his hands in the dharmacakra mudra of teaching. The name inscribed below this monk is very clear: Nam mkha' rgya mtsho, precisely the monk who is renowned for his composition of the devotional prayer to Barawa Gyatsen Pelzang which was so important that it was integrated into the autobiography and mystic songs as conclusion. (Fig. 2)

It is this inscribed figure of the monk Nam mkha' rgya mtsho, whose exact dates are not known at present, which is the clue to identification of the central monk as the revered teacher Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang. The emphasis on this person is very clear, as is his historic significance of devotion to Barawa. He was certainly alive as an adult disciple during the latter portion of Barawa's lifetime, thus his lifespan may be roughly deteremined as ca. 1375- ca.1440.

In addition to the two principal monk disciples of Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang, there are smaller monks nearby the central figure. Their name inscriptions have been read,



Fig. 2: Nam mkha' rgya mtsho

inner sashes of his robes, as well as the gold clasp to keep the pages of his book in order. Such attention to minute detail is evident also in the architecture of the throne itself with series of scrolls rising from the makara lintel to the apex with the kirtimukha face spewing the serpentine tails of the nagas. The shape of the elongated narrow eyes as well as the palette of colors are associated with the paintings of western Tibet. At present there are two thangkas known to have originated in Western Tibet, both collected by Giuseppe Tucci during his travels in western Tibet and western Himalayas ca 1935: one is a small thangka portrait of a Kargyu monk, from south-west Tibet in the Tucci collection in Rome,[5] (Fig. 3) and the other a larger thangka of Vajradhara in a private collection.[6]

The present portrait of Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang is an exceptionally fine painting in the tradition of western Tibet. By the very large scale it was clearly a major commission for a prestigious chapel, whether for a monastery or an aristocratic home. The painting is an elegant homage to Barawa Gyaltsen Pelzang as a teacher, as a writer and an eminent monk of the Drukpa tradition.



Fig. 3: Kargyu Monk
Tucci expedition

Footnotes

1. Treasury of Lives: <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Barawa-Gyeltsen-Pelzang/3266>
2. Autobiography and songs of 'Ba' ra pa rGyal mtshan dpal bzang po, 1-190, and A supplementary note to the biography of 'Ba' ra ba by Nam mkha' rgya mtsho, pp. 190-193: item 671 in the Catalogue of the Tucci Tibetan Fund in the Library of ISIAO, volume 2, Elena De Rossi Filibeck, Roma 2003, p. 335.
3. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/947> worldly protector Nyen chen tanglha. Description of this protector wearing his turban is found in *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Graz, 1975, p. 206.
4. Buddha Amitabha, western Tibet or western Himalayas, 107 x 80 cm, 12th c, Pritzker Collection, see P. Pal, *Himalayas an Aesthetic Adventure*, Chicago, 2003, no. 99.
5. Lama Kargyupa (inventory number 966), southwest Tibet, 55x 43 cm, 15th -16th century, illustrated as Plate 29, *Visibilia Invisibilium*, M.L. Tabasso, M.A.Polichetti, C. Seccaroni (eds), Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', Roma, 2011.
6. Vajradhara, west Tibet, ca 1450, 96 x 76.5 cm, Fondation Alain Bordier, Tibet Museum (ABP 048), described and illustrated page 86-87, *Buddhist Art of Tibet in Milarepa's Footsteps*, E. Bock, J-M. Falcombello, M. Jenny, Paris, 2022. See also cat. 18, *Art Sacré du Tibet, Collection Alain Bordier*, G. Béguin, Suilly-la-Tour, 2013, pp. 68-69.

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