THE NAMES THAT ENCODE MANY ASPECTS OF THE "LOTUS-BORN" GURU

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Fig. 1 Padmasambhava and His Manifestations; Tibet; ca. late 13th century or later; stone with traces of pigment, 9¼ × 6½ × 2 in. (23.5 × 16.7 × 5 cm); Foundation of Alain Bordier–Tibet Museum, Gruyères, Switzerland; photograph courtesy Tibet Museum–Fondation Alain Bordier

PADMASAMBHAVA AND HIS MANIFESTATIONS

Tibet
late 13th century or later

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SUMMARY

Scholar of Tibetan religion Daniel Hirshberg and art historian Elena Pakhoutova examine an unusual stone statue of the legendary Indian master Padmasambhava, who is believed to have helped convert Tibet to Buddhism in the eighth century. Despite scant historical accounts of Padmasambhava, meditative visions of the twelfth-century Tibetan master Nyangrel Nyima Wozer formalized Padmasambhava's eight enlightened forms.

This unusual sculpture carved from stone is perhaps the earliest depicting Padmasambhava, the Precious Guru (Guru Rinpoche), in his eight manifestations. Among all the great masters who brought Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava, whose name means "Lotus-Born, " is unparalleled. Although the historical record makes scant mention of him, a vibrant biographical tradition developed in the centuries after the Tibetan Empire's collapse (ca. 842), establishing his place at the epicenter of Tibetan Buddhism, both figuratively and iconographically.[1] According to later histories, the Indian monastic Shantarakshita advised the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen (742–ca. 800) to invite Padmasambhava, a tantric master, to accomplish what they could not: ritually subdue the local gods and demons so Buddhism could be established in Tibet.

The earliest surviving mentions of Padmasambhava seem to indicate that he operated under several aliases.[2] He became the focal point of the Ancient (Nyingma) tradition, which traces its lineages to his teachings. Regardless of sectarian affiliation, every Tibetan monastery contains statues and paintings of this cultural hero, for all of Tibet's traditions are thought to stem from Padmasambhava and his activities.

ASPECTS REVEALED

Nyangrel Nyima Wozer (1124–1192) was the first of the great Buddhist treasure revealers. These *tertons* claim to be reincarnations of Padmasambhava's eighth-century disciples who are empowered to recover his concealed texts and relics, known as treasures (*terma*) in later centuries. As the preeminent architect of this tradition, Nyangrel compiled the *Copper Island Biography of Padmasambhava* (*Namtar Zanglingma*).[3] The first text to structure a complete narrative of the Precious Guru's life, it began with his origin story of being discovered on the pistil of a lotus in northwest India and ended with his final departure from Tibet. Nyangrel incorporated the

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scattered threads of Padmasambhava lore, preserving the precedents of details available to him, including the multiple monikers that accumulate throughout the story. In the earliest surviving versions of the *Copper Island*—texts that are closest to Nyangrel's twelfth-century original—Padmasambhava goes by a dozen names and epithets.

Many years after completing the *Copper Island*, Nyangrel had a meditative vision in which he traveled to a pure realm and met eight distinct Padmasambhavas, each positioned at the cardinal and intermediate directions of a mandala.[4] The "eight names of the guru" (*guru tsen gye*) became a standard set, encoding key moments of Padmasambhava's life into monikers that inspired each aspect's iconography, despite scant descriptive details in textual references.

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE EIGHT NAMES

This sculpture (fig. 1) from the Alain Bordier collection represents the normative set of Padmasambhava's eight names in a typical composition. The central figure is his most popular form, named Padmasambhava in Sanskrit and Pema Jungne in Tibetan, also known as Lake-Born Vajra (*Tsokye Dorje*), referencing his miraculous birth on a lotus.

At bottom left and right are his two fierce aspects, Sengge Dradrok and Dorje Drolo, unmistakable with ferocious faces and corpulent bodies wreathed in flames. Nothing in the *Copper Island* suggests that these names should be depicted so monstrously. Dorje Drolo was the last of the Guru's names to be standardized. Here, he displays his characteristic iconography—a vajra in the right hand and three-sided dagger, or *purba*, in the left—suggesting that the sculpture was created at a time when Padmasambhava's lore was already popularized by two expanded fourteenth-century biographies.[5] These texts repeat the eight names several times, further establishing them as the definitive set for Padmasambhava's aspects.[6]

Directly above the fierce aspects are his manifestations as the tantrika Nyima Wozer and the monk Shakya Sengge, the latter of whom appears identical to renderings of Buddha Shakyamuni. Above them are the two king types, Loden Chokse and Pema Gyelpo, though only

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the latter is royalty. Loden Chokse is a tantrika who thrives in the charnel grounds; his royal attire adds symmetry to the visual pairing but lacks any precedent in narrative descriptions. The arrangement could also acknowledge an alignment of Nyima Wozer and Loden Chokse as transgressive tantric yogins, compared with the monk Shakya Sengge and king Pema Gyelpo, who are bound by social norms.

The final pairing below the triad at the apex includes Pema Jungne, wearing scholar's robes on the right, and Orgyen Dorje Chang, shown with his consort Mandarava at left. The depiction of a couple facing outward is unusual, reminiscent of Indic images of the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati.

HIERARCHY OF PADMASAMBHAVA'S THREE BODIES

Finally, the top triad includes Padmasambhava's most subtle and refined aspects. At the apex of the sculpture is Amitayus, who signifies his ultimate empty essence, known as the "truth body" (*dharmakaya*). Slightly below is the four-armed Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, representing his blissful luminous nature as the "complete enjoyment body" (*sambhogakaya*). The figure at top right, portrayed with his consort in a dynamic standing posture and ensconced in flames, is less immediately recognizable. It is most likely Hayagriva, the fierce meditational deity of the lotus buddha family. He is appropriately placed in the position of Padmasambhava's "magically emanated body" (*nirmanakaya*). Hayagriva is also included in a similarly composed metal sculpture of Padmasambhava's aspects in the Rubin Museum (fig. 2). The iconography of Hayagriva seen here—with one face, two arms, and standing with his consort—is said to stem from the early treasure revealers, including Nyangrel.[7]

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Fig. 2 Padmasambhava and His Eight Manifestations, Hayagriva, flanked by Yeshe Tsogyel, and Shantarakshita; Tibet; 16th century; copper alloy, 9 1/4 × 6 3/4 × 4 1/4 in. (24.4 × 17.1 × 8.6 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2003.51.1 (HAR 65283)

An early mandala painting shows the same form of Hayagriva at its center, surrounded by the manifestations of Padmasambhava on the lotus petals of the inner mandala.[8] It is dated to the fourteenth century on iconographic and stylistic grounds and provides a context for this carved image and its possible date.

FORM AND MATERIAL

The Padmasambhava sculpture featured here follows Indian compositions, most notably depictions of the Events of the Buddha's Life, in which a large central image is surrounded by

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smaller figures. Such portable reliefs made of soft stone phyllite and dated to the eleventh through thirteenth centuries are found across the Buddhist world.[9] Carved images of teachers with episodes from their lives in the same stone and format also survive but present different stylistic features.[10]

This sculpture also might have been carved from phyllite, a brown-beige-colored soft stone, but the central image is made from white stone, possibly soapstone. If so, it could explain the slightly worn features of the central figure's face and right hand, the elements that protrude the most on the sculpture. The rest of the central figure, set in shallower relief and protected by its placement in the niche, retains crisper details. Examples of miniature sculptures in soapstone portraying Tibetan teachers are rare.[11] Stone sculptures were typically painted, as traces of pigments here indicate.

VISUAL CONVENTIONS

The structurally common composition of the figures arranged around the main image includes a throne back reminiscent of Nepalese visual conventions. Such thrones, with elaborate torana-like arches, mythical *garuda* birds at the top, and stacked animals on either side of the throne, are often found in architectural settings—for instance, stone sculptures carved into the niches of stupas or fountains—as well as paintings.

Given the scarcity of stylistically equivalent sculptural examples, it is helpful to consider painted representations that parallel the sculpture's visual conventions. Possibly contemporary with this carving is an early thangka painting of Karmapa with His Footprints in the Rubin Museum collection (fig. 3).[12] It shares several visual elements with the sculpture: the throne back, an oval-shaped mandorla (body radiance), stacked animals on either side of the throne, entwining lotus vines that encircle each of the vignettes around the central figure,[13] and the arrangement of the teacher's lotus throne, including two small blooms at the lower forefront.

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Fig. 3 Karmapa with His Footprints; central Tibet; late 12th–early 13th century or later; pigments on silk, 21 1⁄2 × 19 in. (54.61 × 48.26 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; gift of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation; F1997.32.2 (HAR 508) link to eMuseum: https://collection.rubinmuseum.org/objects/560/karmapa-with-his-footprints

A distinct element in the painting is a parasol that replaces the *garuda*-topped torana-like arch. However, a painting from about the thirteenth century in a private collection that portrays another famous Indian master, Padampa Sanggye, exhibits the same style of throne as the sculpture, complete with the *garuda* at the throne's apex. It also displays all the other elements described above. Additionally, similar vines encircling single figures painted around a focal point on the ceiling of the Luri stupa cave and generally dated to the thirteenth to early fourteenth century provide another temporal reference to this visual convention.

Teacher depictions appear to emerge from a shared cultural environment, in which Nepalese and Indian conventions were skillfully employed to create Tibetan Buddhist images. Unlike the

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earlier Indian sculptures, often treasured as portable souvenirs from sacred sites, these images seem intended to inspire devotional reverence in their patrons, who were disciples of the lineages represented by these masters.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] For an overview of Padmasambhava's historicity and mythology, see Daniel A. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2016), 1–31.

[2] See Jacob P. Dalton, "The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet: A Second Look at the Evidence from Dunhuang," in *About Padmasambhava: Historical Narratives and Later Transformations of Guru Rinpoche. Samuel, Geoffrey, and Jamyang Oliphant of Rossie*, ed. eds. (Zurich: Garuda Verlag, 2020), 29–64, passim.

[3] For an English translation of a later nineteenth-century publication of the *Copper Island*, see Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal*), The Lotus-Born: The Life-Story of Padmasambhava*, trans. Erik Pema Kunzang (Boston: Shambhala, 1991).

[4] *Dri ma med pa*, in Chos kyi 'od zer, Myang ston Bsod nams seng ge, and Chos kyi 'od zer and Myang ston Bsod nams seng ge, "Sprul sku mnga' bdag chen po'i skyes rabs rnam thar dri ma med pa'i bka' rgya can la ldeb," in *Bka' brgyad bder gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, vol. 1 (Gangtok: Lama Sonam Tobgay Kazi, 1978), 150–60.

[5] *Shel brag ma (the Crystal Cave) and Gser 'phreng (the Golden Garland)* are named after their places of discovery. A problematic early twentieth-century French translation of the *Crystal Cave* was later translated into English as the *Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* (Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal), *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* (Padma Bka'i Thang), trans. Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, 2 vols. (Reprint, Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1978)). Kazi Dawa Samdup translated excerpts of the *Golden Garland* into English (W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, Reprint 2000 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954)).

[6] Guru Chowang (1212–1270), who was intimately familiar with his claimed preincarnation's writings, dreamed of the eight names. By the fourteenth century, the eight names are praised repeatedly in the *Crystal Cave*, so the convention had become quite normalized by that time.

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[7] Jeff Watt, "Mandala of Hayagriva (Buddhist Deity)—Red with Consort (1 Face, 2 Hands)," Himalyan Art Resources, accessed June 29, 2021, https://www.himalayanart.org/items/30911.

[8] Private collection, https://www.himalayanart.org/items/30911.

[9] See Claudine Bautze-Picron, "Between India and Burma: The 'Andagu' Stelae," *Marg* 50, no. 4 (1999): 37–52.

[10] Compare with fig. 122D in Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), 1:382–83.

[11] See a lama figure featured in the Christie's sale catalog New York, March 20, 2012, lot 105, https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5538758.

[12] The painting had been variously dated. Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*, Exhibition Catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004) dates it to the early fourteenth century. David Jackson gives two different dates, the late twelfth century, see David P. Jackson, *Mirror of the Buddha: Early Portraits from Tibet*, Exhibition catalog, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 3 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), 79 https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/mirror_of_the_buddha_96 and the thirteenth century, see David P. Jackson, *Patron and Painter: Situ Panchen and the Revival of the Encampment Style*, Exhibition catalog, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 1 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2009), 73-74, https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/patron_and_patron_96.

[13] In the painting these are the Eight Auspicious Symbols.

FURTHER READING

Hirshberg, Daniel A. 2016. *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom.

Pakhoutova, Elena, ed. 2018. *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*. Exhibition Catalog. New York: Delmonico Books/Prestel.

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Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal). 1991. *The Lotus-Born: The Life-Story of Padmasambhava*. Translated by Erik Pema Kunzang. Boston: Shambhala.

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ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today. Along with a digital platform and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the Rubin's Project Himalayan Art, an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at: http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart

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