

Warrior Emperor and Ecclesiastic Thaumaturge: Relations between Mongke Qan and Karma Pakshi

Charles Manson

A 13th-century Tibetan Buddhist adept, Karma Pakshi is generally - if somewhat inaccurately - accredited with representing the beginning of the tradition of ecclesiastical succession by reincarnation, which spread over Central Asian areas wherever Tibetan Buddhism had influence. In middle age he was invited from Central Tibet to Qubilai Qan's court in China, but the relationship did not progress well, and he subsequently went to Qara Qorum and Mongke's court, for the years 1256-1259.

According to Karma Pakshi's autobiographical writings, his demonstration of miraculous events earned him Mongke's interest, so that the emperor participated in a tantric initiation rite bestowed by Karma Pakshi, received meditation instruction, and appointed Karma Pakshi as a Buddhist representative in a philosophical debate spectacle. Karma Pakshi also claimed influence on Mongke's social policies, persuading the emperor to instigate meat-free days, prisoner releases, and donation of treasury funds to the poor. The pair separated on good terms shortly before Mongke's death, while Karma Pakshi proceeded homeward to Tibet, only to be captured by Qubilai Qan's forces and subjected to tortures and 'internal exile', before eventual reconciliation.

This paper will present the Mongolian interludes of Karma Pakshi's life, largely through the thaumaturge's idiosyncratic writings. Events, dates and locations are extracted where possible, with an eye to ancillary contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of the relationship between emperor and ecclesiastic. This presentation of accounts will add a Tibetan dimension to our knowledge of Mongke Qan.