Locating the Copper-Colored Mountain: Buddhist Cosmology, Himalayan Geography, and Maps of Imagined Worlds

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Abstract

This article explores various ways in which Tibetan authors have attempted to locate the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain (Tib. zangs mdog dpal ri), considered to be the present abode of Padmasambhava, the tantric guru famous for establishing Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century. Literary sources ranging from the twelfth through the nineteenth century are considered as examples of the cultural work of place-making. Their authors are shown to draw upon multiple frameworks to map the Copper-Colored Mountain as a sacred site. Using a list of place-names associated with the mountain that are found in the closing chapters of Nyangrel Nyima Oser’s seminal biography of Padmasambhava—The Copper Palace (Tib. zangs gling ma)—as a starting point, four different systems of spatial ordering are identified and explored. These are: 1) the traditional cosmology found in the Abhidharma, 2) the tales of demon-inhabited islands found in jātaka and avadāna stories, 3) the sacred geography of the tantras with their networks of sacred sites corresponding to different parts of the body, and 4) the empirical models of modern geography that started to influence Tibetan conceptions of space in the eighteenth century.

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