

Khardo Hermitage (Mkhar rdo ri khrod)



The ruins of Khardo Hermitage.

Location and Layout¹

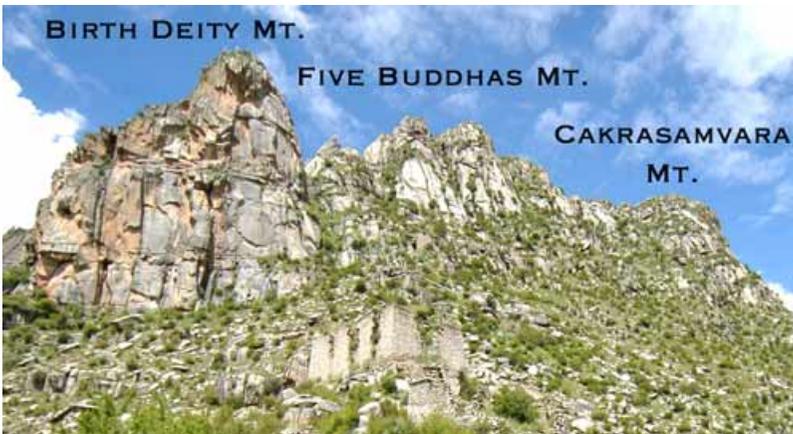
Khardo Hermitage is located northeast of Lha sa (and of Se ra) on the side of a mountain north of the [Dodé Valley](#). The hermitage is also located across the road leading from Lha sa to 'Phan po on the side of a mountain facing Purchok Hermitage (Phur lcog ri khrod). It is possible to walk directly up the mountain to Mkhar rdo from this road, but it is more common to take the footpath from the Gnas sgo gdong nunnery instead. From the nunnery it takes a little over one hour to walk to Mkhar rdo.

It may be that the hermitage derives its name from the local site deity (*gnas bdag*), whose name is Mkhar rdo srong btsan.

As is the case with most of the hermitages, certain features of the landscape – and especially of the [mountains](#) – around Mkhar rdo are seen as signs of the holiness of the site. One group of peaks behind the monastery is called the Soul Mountain of the Buddhas of the Five Families (Rgyal ba'i rigs lnga bla ri). To the left of these is a mountain called the Birth Deity Peak ('Khrungs ba'i lha ri or 'Khrungs

¹ Most of the account of Khardo Hermitage (Mkhar rdo ri khrod) is based on an extensive interview with a former monk of the monastery conducted in Lha sa in 2004. This informant states that there exists a catalogue (*dkar chag*) for the hermitage (*ri khrod*) written by its founder, Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho (1672-1749), but this text was not available to me; neither is it mentioned in the [TBRC database entry that lists Bzod pa rgya mtsho \(1672-1749\)'s texts](#).

dbu rtse).² In the middle of this mountain there used to be a ledge that housed a small chapel to the protector deities of the regions of Tibet from which the various Mkhar rdo bla mas hailed, hence the name “Birth Deity Peak.” Another prominent peak (to the east) is called the Soul Mountain of Cakrasamvara (Bde mchog bla ri). Tradition has it that various hand-implements and bone-ornaments of the deity have been discovered as treasure on this mountain by different Mkhar rdo incarnations. On one side of this mountain there is a cave called the “Offering Place Cave” (Brag mchod sa),³ in which an entire copy of the *Scriptures* (*Bka' gyur*) was discovered as treasure during the time of the third Kharo incarnation Chökyi Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng gsum pa chos kyi rdo rje).⁴ The monastery itself is said to have been built on the site of the Ha ha rgod pa'i dur khrod, one of the classical charnel grounds of the Indian *tantras*. For these various reasons, the site is considered extremely holy.



The various holy mountains behind the hermitage.

But the location was also made holy by virtue of having been the abode of saints. Above the various buildings there is a cave called Great Heap of Light ('Od zer phung po che). The site-deity, called Mkhar rdo srong btsan, is said to have shown the founder of the monastery, Bzod pa rgya mtsho, this cave and told him that he was to reside here. On one particular holy day Mkhar rdo ba, while living in this cave, found that he had nothing to offer except for a single butter-lamp. His

² Or it may be that the informant said Khrungs ba'i bla ri, in which case it would be “Birth Soul Mountain.”

³ The spelling of this name is conjectural. If it is accurate, it means The Cave That Is a Place of Worship.

⁴ When the Mkhar rdo bla ma found the texts, he asked for 100 monks to be sent from the [Lhopa Regional House \(Lho pa khang tshan\)](#) of Se ra to help carry them away, but the regional house (*khang tshan*) only sent one monk. As a result, only the volume of the *Sūtra of Good Fortune* (*Mdo skal bzang*) was recovered from the cave (the rest presumably disappeared because they were not disinterred in time). This special volume of the *Sūtra of Good Fortune* apparently still exists, being kept at Se ra Byes.

prayers were so pure, however, that when he lit the lamp the entire mountain glowed, “as if thousands of butter lamps were burning.” This is how the cave got its name. Mkhār rdo ba lived in this cave, and in another nearby one called Cave of Mila (Mi la’i brag), during his early and mid twenties, before the first buildings were erected at the site.

The hermitage had **three major compounds**, located one above the other on the side of the mountain. Lowest on the hill was the **main compound** (usually referred to simply as “the hermitage”). Above that was the so-called “**Upper Residence**” (**Gzims khang gong ma**), and above that the **Temple of the Sixteen Arhats** (**Gnas bcu lha khang**). Today all of these compounds lie in ruins. From an informant’s report, however, we have a good sense of what the hermitage looked like before 1959.

Main compound: This was by far the largest group of buildings in the monastery, housing various important temples, a library, and the residential quarters of the Mkhār rdo bla mas. At **the front** (lowest on the mountain), the compound was three stories tall; at the rear it was two stories in height. As one went in the main door (*gzhung sgo*), located at the front of the compound at the bottom-most level, one first came to a room that is said to have been built on top of the uppermost part of the Ha ha rgod pa’i dur khrod. This was a large (eight-pillar) room that was in almost total darkness. It housed many self-arisen images, but apparently was not for any specific purpose.



Inside the ruins of the main compound.

As one went up the central staircase, one came first to the (four-pillar) temple that is said to date to the time of Mkhār rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho. This small temple had seating for about 20 monks. It contained statues of the sixteen arhats as well as the large silver funerary *stūpa* of Bzod pa rgya mtsho built by his student, the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa skal bzang rgya mtsho). The mummified corpse (*dmār gdung*) of Mkhār rdo ba was contained within this *stūpa*. In the rear portion of the temple there was a chapel to Maitreya (Byams pa). Tradition has it that the two-story statue of Maitreya in this temple

was created by a deity. Inside the heart of this statue there was a tooth-relic of the Buddha Kaśyapa, and there was a small window on the body of the Maitreya statue where this tooth could actually be seen.

On this same level of the compound there was also a round room that contained the monastery's collection of wood-blocks and texts. This library contained many special works, such as the texts discovered as "treasure" (*gter*) by the third Khardo incarnation Rikdzin Chökyi Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng gsum pa rigs 'dzin chos kyi rdo rje): the *Cycle for Gathering Power* (*Dbang 'dus 'khor lo*), the *Cycle on Gaṇeśa* (*Tshogs bdag lag na 'khor lo*), etc. Important blockprints of artwork and of the monastery's ritual texts (*yig cha*) were also kept there. The collection included texts of all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Most of these texts and blockprints were confiscated when the monastery came under the receivership of the government after the Rwa sgreng (d. 1947) affair (see below).

If one turned left as one exited the library, one came to the protector deity chapel (*mgon khang*). This room contained statues of the four traditional deities propitiated in most Dge lugs institutions (Mgon po, Chos rgyal, Lha mo, and Rnam sras) as well as a statue of the protector deity of the monastery, Gter bdag srong btsan. In the rear of the protector deity chapel, there was another smaller chapel that was only open for one day each year (during the New Year festivities). It contained a large self-arisen image of the deity Dbang phyug chen po.

Coming out of the protector deity chapel, one arrived at the central courtyard where the side door of the main compound was located. From that courtyard one had access to a variety of rooms which included the *rten khang*,⁵ a large (eight-pillar) storage room, the lama's estate's (*bla brang*) (two-pillar) kitchen, a (two-pillar) manager's room (*gnyer tshang*) that served as the office and living quarters for the hermitage's manager (*gnyer pa*), and a variety of other small rooms where fuel (wood, straw and dung) were kept. Around this courtyard there was also a three-pillar guest room, as well as a room for frying and storing dough cookies.

If one went up one level, to the third floor, one came first to the two-pillar quarters for the Da lai bla ma, called the Palace of Great Bliss (Bde chen pho brang). The Thirteenth Dalai Lama Tupten Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa thub bstan rgya mtsho) stayed here, as perhaps did other of his predecessors. The principal image in the Da lai bla ma's rooms was a very special image of Maitreya that is said to have originally belonged to a monastery in 'Phan po. It is said that the statue levitated, flew to Mkhar rdo and proclaimed that Mkhar rdo was its true home. There were also metal statues of the Twenty-One Tārās (Sgrol ma) in the Da lai bla ma's rooms. The central Tārā image was of solid silver. There were also statues of the Sixteen Arhats, and various *thang kas*. Going down the hall from the Da lai bla ma's quarters, one came to the Khardo Assembly Hall (Mkhar rdo tshoms chen), a temple that could house over 100 monks. This temple was also called the Rgya res tshoms chen, because the deity Rgya res was supposed

⁵ Both the spelling and the meaning of this term are unclear.

to have built the large Maitreya statue found here. The temple had ten “short pillar” (*ka thung*), and two “long pillar” (*ka ring*); it also had three doors. This temple contained:

- One-story tall metal statues of the Buddhas of the Three Times
- A one-story metal statue of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419)
- The throne of the Da lai bla ma
- A life-size statue of the fifth Khardo incarnation Jamyang Chökyi Wangchuk (Mkhar rdo sku phreng lnga pa jam dbyangs chos kyi dbang phyug)
- A life-size statue of Padmasambhava (Padma ’byung gnas)
- A one-story “speaking-statue” (*gsung byon ma*) of Tārā
- On one side of the temple there was a complete copy of a printed edition of the *Scriptures* (*Bka’ ’gyur*), and on the other, a manuscript version of the same. The manuscript version is apparently dated to the time of Mkhar rdo sku phreng bzhi pa padma dga’ ba’i rdo rje. This *bla ma*’s steward began a custom of having the monks do at least one yearly ritual reading of the *Bka’ ’gyur*, a tradition that was kept alive up to 1959.
- The murals on the walls of the assembly hall were of the Thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Age.

As one exited the temple, one immediately encountered the four-pillar Palace of the Rays of the Sun (Nyi ’od pho brang). This chapel held the funerary *stūpa* of the third Khardo incarnation Rikdzin Chökyi Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng gsum pa rigs ’dzin chos kyi rdo rje). It also contained self-arisen images of the sixteen arhats, statues of the twenty-one Tārās, a statue of Thang stong rgyal po, of Dpal ldan lha mo, a statue of the fourth Khardo incarnation Pema Gawé Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng bzhi pa padma dga’ ba’i rdo rje), a statue of Padmasambhava (Padma ’byung gnas) and other lesser images.

Exiting the Palace of the Rays of the Sun, one next came to the series of rooms that constituted the lama’s estate proper – that is, the living quarters of the *bla ma* and his immediate family and steward. The first of these rooms was a two-pillar chapel called the Siddha Chapel (Grub thob lha khang) that housed clay statues of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas* of India. They are said to have been made by the third Mkhar rdo bla ma himself. There were also images of the Five Visions of the Lord (Tsongkhapa) (*rje gzigs pa lnga ldan*). The next room was the private residence of the mothers of the Mkhar rdo bla ma incarnations. Adjacent to that was a balcony or sun room (*rab gsal*), on the other side of which were the quarters of the administrator administrative head (*phyag mdzod*) of the lama’s estate. Beyond the steward’s quarters were the private rooms of the Mkhar rdo bla ma. The *bla ma*’s reception room contained various metal statues, including statues of Padmasambhava (Padma ’byung gnas) in eight forms, a statue of Hayagrīva (Rta mgrin), statues of Tsong kha pa and the two disciples, and others as well.

If one traveled one flight of stairs up from the *bla ma*’s private rooms, one would arrive at another small (two-pillar) protector deity chapel called the Chapel

of the Four Statues (Sku bzhi khang), so called because it contained four statues of mgon po. This is the location of the famous “Khardo (Hermitage’s) Lord of Death Machine” (*mkhar rdo gshin rje ’khrul ’khor*), a mechanical device for conjuring wrathful magical powers (*drag phyogs kyi las*). This “wheel of weapons” (*mtshon cha’i ’khor lo*) had been utilized at different points in Tibetan history to magically defeat invading forces.⁶ The machine had the ability to conjure up the powers of different sets of deities (gods, *nāgas*, etc.) depending upon the direction in which it was turned. Various “trophies” from the defeated parties hung from the beams of the ceiling of this room, including the desiccated hand of the leader of the Dogra troops (defeated, it is said, chiefly as a result of using this form of magic at the time of the third Mkhar rdo bla ma in 1856). The hands of famous bandits and other criminals had, throughout the years, been added to the collection of human limbs suspended from the ceiling. Next to this chapel, there was a room called the Treasure-House of Vaiśravaṇa (Rnam sras bang mdzod). It contained eight “wealth-box” (*yang gam*) where the ritual wealth-vases for the monastery were kept. This room was opened only once a year on New Year’s day; otherwise it was kept locked.



The ruins of the Upper Residence.

Exiting from the protector chapel and going down the hall one came to the Kadam Chapel (Bka’ gdams lha khang), a four pillar temple. It contained a one-story

⁶ René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz has described this machine in his *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, nd), 493, where he calls it “the Mill of the Shinjé” (*gshin rje’i rang thag*): “It consists of two millstones. The lower is firmly fixed, the upper one can be turned with the help of a handle. Into the surface of the upper stone has been chiseled a number of powerful *mantras*. The *gShin rje rang thag* serves as an instrument to kill the leader of a hostile party, and it may be turned only by a learned, high-ranking priest specially nominated by the authorities. In the initial stages of this action the priest has to concentrate his thoughts upon a few seeds of white mustard, into which he tries to transfer the ‘life-essence’ (*srog snying*) of the enemies. As soon as certain secret signs indicate that this process has been successfully accomplished, he has to place the seeds between the millstones and grind them under the chanting of *mantras*. Tradition alleges that turning the *gShin rje rang thag* is a process dangerous even to the person who handles the mill, and several priests who have carried out this task are said to have died soon afterwards.”

statue of the Buddha, as well as statues of the sixteen arhats, statues of 138 *blamas* of the Bka' gdams pa tradition, and the funerary *stūpa* and image of the fourth Mkhar rdo bla ma. Next to this chapel, there was the small (one-pillar) “Three Roots” Chapel (Rtsa gsum lha khang), which contained a statue of the Thirteen-Deity Vajrabhairava ('Jigs byed lha bcu gsum) as well as important statues of Tsong kha pa and of Acala (Mi g.yo ba). The name of the chapel (“three roots”) derives from the fact that the main statue of Yamāntaka in this room was made from clay over which the three root teachers of this tradition – Sgrub khang pa, Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa (1682-1762) and Mkharrdo bzod pa rgya mtsho – had recited 100,000 repetitions of the “yamarāja” *mantra* of Yamāntaka.

The Upper Residence. Just uphill from the main compound is the so-called “Upper Residence” (Gzims khang gong ma).⁷ This compound was not, strictly speaking, under the aegis of the hermitage, but rather was administered by Tibetan government. It had two floors. On the first floor it contained a protector deity chapel. The Tibetan government would send monks from the Tantric College (Sngags pa grwa tshang) once a year (in the summer) to conduct rituals in this chapel. The second floor contained the private quarters of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa bskal bzang rgya mtsho), and of Mkharrdo bzod pa rgya mtsho. It may be that this compound was originally constructed to serve as the residence of the Seventh Dalai Lama when he visited his teacher, Bzod pa rgya mtsho. If this is the case, then this small compound predates the main compound.



The Temple of the Sixteen Arhats.

⁷ The word *gong ma* can mean “upper/higher,” but it can also refer to the emperor (in this case, the Da lai bla ma). Either interpretation makes sense, given that this building (a) is higher on the mountain than the main compound, and (b) was constructed as a residence for the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa bskal bzang rgya mtsho) when he came to visit his teacher Bzod pa rgya mtsho.

The Sixteen Arhat Temple. Farther north up the mountain from the Upper Residence is the Temple of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas bcu lha khang), the first structure built by Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho at the site. It originally contained only the temple and a small room that served as the first residence that Bzod pa rgya mtsho occupied at Mkhar rdo. Later it was expanded, and at a certain point in history the compound was converted into monks' living quarters, though it is not clear when precisely this occurred.

Farther up the mountainside still are the **caves** originally used by Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho before he built the first structures at the site. Before 1959, women were not allowed inside these caves. Today, **nuns** use these as retreat places. The nuns also serve as caretakers.



One of the caves occupied by Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho when he first arrived at the site. Today it serves as a nun's meditation cell.

The one former monk from the hermitage who served as our informant in 2004 (and who, as far as we know, is the only member of this hermitage still alive today) told us that he contemplated refurbishing the monastery when liberalization took place in the 1980s. He decided not to pursue this because, on the one hand, he was unsuccessful at receiving permission from the relevant offices of the Lha sa municipal government, and, on the other, because he received a letter from the present Mkhar rdo rin po che (who lives in the United States) who discouraged him from proceeding with the renovations.



A statue of Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho preserved at Rakhadrak Hermitage (Ra kha brag ri khrod).

History

Khardo Hermitage was founded in 1706⁸ by Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho,⁹ a student of Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho (1641-1713).¹⁰ Bzod pa rgya mtsho entered the Jé College (Grwa tshang byes) of Se ra at age nine, and studied intensively for the next six years. When he was fifteen he asked permission to pursue intensive retreat. His teacher was agreeable, and he began to travel in southern Tibet, visiting various holy sites, and remaining in isolated retreat in various locations for the next five years of his life. He returned to Se ra when he was twenty, and it was at this time that he met the charismatic Sgrub khang pa,

⁸ This is the date given by Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 2002), 432. However, according to an informant, Bzod pa rgya mtsho lived at the site from the time he was 24 years old (that is, from 1796/7), and perhaps even a few years before that.

⁹ The details of the life of the various Mkhar rdo incarnations that follow are based on an informant's account. For a slightly different version of the life of Mkhar rdo ba, see the [Introduction to the Hermitages](#).

¹⁰ On this figure, see the [Introduction to the Hermitages](#).

who was giving teachings on the graded stages of the path (*lam rim*) at his hermitage above Se ra. After this cycle of teachings was over (around the time that Bzod pa rgya mtsho was twenty-four years old), he decided to go into more permanent retreat and, as the result of certain visionary signs, chose a cave at Mkhar rdo as his home.

Bzod pa rgya mtsho initially lived as a hermit in caves at Mkhar rdo. Certain events,¹¹ however, brought him to the attention of the Seventh Dalai Lama, who then requested Mkhar rdo ba to become his assistant tutor (*mtshan zhabs*). From this time forward, the Da lai bla ma acted as Mkhar rdo ba's patron and it was as a result of the Da lai bla ma's financial assistance that the first temple (Temple of the Sixteen Arhats) was built at Mkhar rdo. Shortly after this temple was completed, the Seventh Dalai Lama provided the funds for the construction of a residence at the site, which he used when he went to Mkhar rdo to visit his teacher. This building is what came to be known as the Upper Residence (see above). The Seventh Dalai Lama is also credited with having sponsored the construction of the first buildings in what later became the main compound. It was upon the completion of this latter project that he gave permission for eight fully ordained monks to live at the site. He also provided the hermitage with one small estate in the Dodé Valley for its support.

After the death of Bzod pa rgya mtsho, the Seventh Dalai Lama performed all of the necessary funerary rites for his teacher, and sponsored the construction of his funerary *stūpa* and of his statue. (This existed at Khardo Hermitage until 1959.) The Da lai bla ma also undertook the search for his teacher's reincarnation, whom he found in 'Phan po, not far from Lha sa. Just as with Bzod pa rgya mtsho and the Seventh Dalai Lama, a teacher-student relationship was established between the second Mkhar rdo bla ma and the Eighth Dalai Lama Jampel Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bryad pa 'jam dpal rgya mtsho). The second Mkhar rdo rin po che travelled extensively in northern Tibet, and he founded at least two monasteries in Nag chu which then became satellite monasteries of Khardo Hermitage.¹² This shows us how even relatively small hermitages (Mkhar rdo) could, because of their power and connections, become the mother institutions to larger monasteries (like those in Nag chu). It may be the case that this was as much an economic as it was a religious relationship for Mkhar rdo, for the nomads of the region of Nag chu in which the two monasteries were located apparently used the lands belonging to the Khardo Hermitage in Lha sa as a base of operations in the summer when they came to barter in Lha sa. One assumes that having this type of relationship with the Nag chu nomads also meant that Khardo Hermitage hermitage had a source of meat, butter and other dairy products, which the Mkhar rdo bla mas probably received as offerings and/or as fees for services rendered.

¹¹ See above concerning the miracle associated with the Great Heap of Light Cave.

¹² One of these, Nag chu zhabs brtan dgon pa, eventually came under the aegis of the Drupkhang Lama's estate (Sgrub khang bla brang).

The third Mkhar rdo bla ma, Rigs 'dzin chos kyi rdo rje (b. 1790?) had the habits of a tantric *siddha*. Like the Sixth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng drug pa), he was renowned for enjoying the diversions Lha sa had to offer, especially its bars. He is credited with several important “treasure” discoveries. So great were his powers that when he was coming back from Lha sa on one of his outings, the statue of Dpal ldan lha mo at Drapchi Temple (Grwa bzhi lha khang) would turn its head to look at him.¹³ The footprint in stone of Rigs 'dzin chos kyi rdo rje was preserved at Mkhar rdo until 1959. After he died – sitting next to a small *tsen* chapel (*btsan khang*) at Mkhar rdo – the monks tried to cremate his body, but every time they lit the fire it would be magically extinguished, and so the monks decided instead to preserve his mummified body, which was housed in a *stūpa* in one of the chapels of the hermitage until 1959. The most important Mkhar rdo religious festival is one commemorating this *bla ma*.



Detail of a painting of the Seventh Dalai Lama in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art, from the www.himalayanart.org website, no. 212.

We know little about the next two Mkhar rdo incarnations, although it seems that each of them expanded the hermitage and its holdings. For example, the fourth Mkhar rdo bla ma, who, it seems, was born into a prominent Rnying ma pa family, is known to have built a set of residential rooms at Mkhar rdo known as the Dga' chos dbyings.¹⁴ And the fifth Mkhar rdo bla ma reestablished the relationship with one of the monasteries in Nag chu called Byang chos 'khor gling, where, in fact, he died.

The situation is quite different when we get to the sixth Khardo incarnation Jampel Tupten Nyendrak Gyatso (Mkhar rdo sku phreng drug pa 'jam dpal thub bstan nyan grags rgya mtsho). He entered the Jé College of Se ra and became renowned as a scholar. He was a close friend of the famous fifth Radreng incarnation (Rwa sgreng sku sgreng lnga pa, or “Reting”), who was regent of Tibet

¹³ From this point on, there has been an important connection between Grwa bzhi and Mkhar rdo. For example, only the Mkhar rdo rituals are performed at Grwa bzhi even though the temple itself belongs to the Purchok Lama's estate (Phur ldog bla brang).

¹⁴ The spelling of this word is uncertain. Alternatives include Dga' spyod dbyings and Mkha' spyod dbyings.

between 1934 and 1941, and who studied at Se ra around the same time as the sixth Mkhar rdo bla ma. Mkhar rdo rin po che had backed Rwa sgreng rin po che (d. 1947) during his failed attempt to recoup the regency. After Rwa sgreng rin po che was executed in 1947, the government also retaliated against the Mkhar rdo bla ma. He was imprisoned, all of his land-holdings and many of the religious artifacts inside the hermitage (for example, the library) were confiscated by the Tibetan government, and an edict was issued forbidding the search for future incarnations. After some time, the Mkhar rdo bla ma was transferred to the Nor bu gling kha prison, and there are many stories of miracles that occurred during his stay there. He was freed after a few years, but never returned to Khardo Hermitage (over which he no longer had any rights). He lived for some time on the top floor of the Drapchi Temple. He then visited Byang chos 'khor gling in Nag chu, and finished out the rest of his days at the monastery of one of his students, Thogs med rin po che (twentieth century), in Gnas mo.

All of these events were obviously catastrophic for Khardo Hermitage and its monks. Within a matter of a few years Mkhar rdo went from being one of the richest and most powerful monasteries in the Lha sa valley to being one of the poorest and most marginalized. However, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu bzhi pa) reversed the decision of his regent. He allowed for the next Mkhar rdo bla ma to be found, and restored to him his previous titles and rights. Bstan nor mkhar rdo (b. 1957),¹⁵ the seventh Khardo incarnation Jampel Tendzin Nyendrak Gyatso (Mkhar rdo sku phreng bdun pa 'jam dpal bstan 'dzin nyan grags rgya mtsho), was born in Lha sa. He left Tibet in 1984, and presently lives in the United States.



Nuns sit outside one of the Mkhar rdo caves. Nuns are the only residents of the site today.

¹⁵ This is the seventh Khardo incarnation Jampel Tendzin Nyendrak Gyatso (Mkhar rdo sku phreng bdun pa 'jam dpal bstan 'dzin nyan grags rgya mtsho).

After the events of 1959, the sixty-plus monks of Mkhar rdo were forced to leave the hermitage. Except for a few nuns who live in the caves above the hermitage, the site has remained unoccupied ever since. Today, all of the buildings lie in ruins.

Ritual Cycle

Daily. The 20 fully ordained monks who formed the ritual core of the monastery would gather for “daily tea/prayer” (*rgyun ja*), every morning in the smaller of Mkhar rdo’s two temples.

Monthly. Five days each month were always celebrated:

- First of the month: Tārā Ritual (*sgrol chog*); and bi-monthly confession ritual
- Tenth: Offering-Ritual to the Lama (*bla ma mchod pa tshog*)
- Fifteenth: Medicine Buddha (*smān bla*); and bi-monthly confession
- Twenty-fifth: Offering-Ritual to the Lama
- Twenty-ninth: propitiation ritual (*bskang gso*)

- First Tibetan month: A cycle of rituals, lasting seven days, focusing on Yamāntaka, Guhyasamāja, and Cakrasaṃvara. These began at the end of the New Year festivities.
- Second Tibetan month: For seven days either the *Scriptures* would be read, or else the Prayer to the Twenty-One Tārās would be recited.
- Fourth Tibetan month: unknown ritual
- Fifth Tibetan month: The self-initiation rituals of Sarvavid Vairocana, or else of Kālacakra.
- Sixth Tibetan month: the Sixth-Month/Fourth-Day (*drug pa tshes bzhi*) holy day is celebrated. In addition, one-hundred monks would gather to read the scriptures for seven days during a separate convocation in this same month.
- Ninth Tibetan month: 100,000 repetitions of the Tārā prayer would be accumulated during this month.
- Tenth Tibetan month: Winter Solstice Ritual (*dgun nyi ldog gi cho ga*).
- Eleventh Tibetan month: The monks split into two groups. One group would perform White Mahākāla (Mgon dkar) rituals, and the other, rituals focusing on Rta mgrin.
- Twelfth Tibetan month:
 - Fifteenth day of the month: the hermitage celebrated the famous *mkhar rdo mthun mchod*, a festival commemorating the third Mkhar rdo bla ma. During the festivities, monks from Nenang Nunnery (Gnas nang dgon pa) came to Mkhar rdo to perform various propitiation rituals (for example, to the deity Vajrakīla) in front of the *stūpa* containing the mummified body of the third Khardo incarnation Chökyi Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng gsum

pa chos kyi rdo rje). While the Gnas nang monks were performing those rituals, the monks of Mkhar rdo were simultaneously engaged in other protector deity rituals in one of the other temples. All of the local people from Dog bde who worked for the Khardo Lama's estate (Mkhar rdo bla brang) came up to the hermitage on this day. Upon leaving, they received a bit of money, some butter, meat, and fried dough cookies.

- Twenty-ninth day: A ritual involving the Throwing of the Torma as an offering to Mahākāla (*mgon po gtor rgyag*).