This presentation re-evaluates the notion of divine rulership through the early Tibetan historiographical accounts of the arrival of Buddhism in this “land of snows.” It focuses on the narrative portrayal of Emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri Srong lde brtsan; 742–c.800 CE), whether as a Tibetan conqueror, a Buddhist king or a tantric disciple, after the fall of the empire (c. 850) and up to the twelfth century. The influence of the foreign religion is present from the start. Imperial texts depict him as a great Tibetan emperor, endowed with the authority of his ancestors. Yet some contemporary inscriptions also describe him as a bodhisattva, leading his subjects towards enlightenment. Post-imperial sources, found in the Mogao “library cave” of Dunhuang, transform the emperor into a dharma-king. They identify this ruler with idealised Indian Buddhist predecessors like Emperor Aśoka or King Harṣa. Twelfth-century histories and biographies, remember him as the patron and pupil of spiritually superior Buddhist masters. One Indic tantric master, Padmasambhava, even blames the king’s lack of faith for the future decline of the dharma. Such powerful religious culture-heroes gradually displace the king as the central protagonists of his life history. This presentation thus uncovers the concerns that lie beneath early portrayals of Tri Songdetsen. These include self-presentation, lineage legitimisation and complex relationships with the “golden age” of empire. The transformation of Tri Songdetsen in these Buddhist histories depends upon seismic shifts affecting Tibetan culture, including the cult of religious figures and the influx of Indic literary genres into Tibet. This analysis of Tibetan historiography also has the potential to shed light on Buddhism’s transformation of other Asian cultures and their bodhisattva-kings.