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## Note on the Spatial Iconography of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* in Context

In recent years more material and documentation of early Buddhist temples in the Western Himalayas from the period of the 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries has been published, allowing a study of typologies of structures and an interpretation of functions and meanings of different architectural themes as well as their relation to religious ideas and forms of devotion.

However, existing monographs on early Buddhist temples in the Western Himalayas centre on isolated religious monuments and their artefacts, with little study of interrelations between the different sites. In addition, important examples from this phase, namely the ensembles of three major foundations of Nyarma (Nyar ma, etc.), Tholing (mTho gling, etc.) and Khorchag ('Khor chags, etc.), have received little attention up to now due the political conditions limiting access to the latter two temples. Their ruinous condition or altered state is one of the additional major reasons for this situation. Collating data from different perspectives such as built reality, ritual practice and iconographic function as a single corpus provides a fresh perspective on the evolutionary history of the temples and their symbolism.

This study will discuss new data from the historically linked major royal temple foundations of the period around the first millennium CE, in particular specific features of the programme and of the spatial configuration of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* and will attempt to embed the temple in its artistic-cultural as well as in its ritual context.<sup>1</sup> The basis of the comparative perspective is extensive



<sup>1</sup> Field research in Ladakh has been conducted by the author since 2000; studies on site in Nyarma were carried out on initiative and in collaboration with Christian Jahoda in 2009. I wish to thank the nuns and the abbess of the nunnery at Nyarma in particular for their hospitality, support and valuable information.

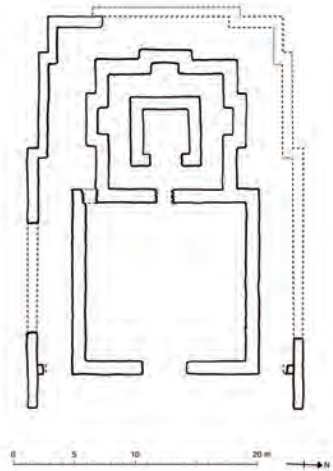
field research in areas of historical Western Tibet since 2007 and the collection of data on hitherto little-studied monuments of the West Tibet kingdom. The analysis will include questions of the historicity of the form and symbolism of the site, through comparative analysis of

1. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: view from south-west (C. Kalantari, 2009).



2. Nyarma, general view of sacred site  
(C. Kalantari, 2009).

3. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*:  
view from the courtyard  
(Q. Devers, 2009).



4. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*:  
"original" structures from  
the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century phase  
(plan by Q. Devers, 2012).

the temple art and architecture in the neighbouring and historically linked regions of Central Tibet, Ladakh,<sup>2</sup> Himachal Pradesh and the Indian plains, as well as Kashmir.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Few studies have as yet focused on the historic context of the early Buddhist building forms in Ladakh; pioneers in this field are Romi Khosla (1975, 1979) and Roger Goepfer (1996).

<sup>3</sup> A short description of the architectural remains and of the interior decoration of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* ("Main Temple") is provided by Christian Luczanits (2004: 29ff), who also published some results of comparative research focusing on the early monuments at Alchi (Luczanits and Neuwirth 2010). Holger Neuwirth provided a general map of the sacred site of Nyarma as well as

Focusing now on the royal foundation at Nyarma, the main temple or *gtsug lag khang* impresses—despite its ruinous state—because of the monumentality of the walls, the precision of the layout and outstanding quality of the construction. Furthermore it is of central importance for religious-artistic and architectural studies because it provides an almost intact original layout of an early sacred space in the region (Figs. 1–3).

The temple lies on an east-west axis with the main hall (*du khang*) and a shrine-chamber-cum-ambulatory at its west end (Fig. 4). The present structures clearly convey that one of the main forms of devotion, i.e. a circumambulation, or meditative walk outside and inside the temple, is expressed in the architectonic layout, namely as corridors around the main hall (*du khang*) and the sanctum (*dri gtsang khang*) as well as an entrance hall (*sgo khang*). Gergan was the first to show the relationship between the architectural structure and the ritual practice as discussed by Jahoda ("Joseph Thsertan Gergan's report on Nyarma, 1917", this volume, pp. 171–199). A comparable spatial configuration with an outer ambulatory can be found in the Alchi 'Du khang, as already observed by Luczanits and Neuwirth (2010: 80; see below, Fig. 13). Luczanits (2004: 307, n. 118) also described the typological link between Nyarma's core structures and the Tabo *gtsug lag khang*. While Tabo has no outer ambulatory path, the assembly hall features raised sculptures (dating from the renovation phase, ca. mid-11<sup>th</sup> century) attached to the walls at a height of ca. 160 cm from the current ground level, indicating a form of worship through a meditative walk under these sculptures and thus giving a lead to the ritual circumambulation of the temple and dynamic perception of its programme (Kalantari 2016);<sup>4</sup> the latter is a contrasting feature to Nyarma (see below). With regard to the original function of the biggest structure at Nyarma, Gergan suggested that—in addition to the size and complex shape—the pilgrimage paths in and around this temple indicate the original function of this structure as *gtsug lag khang* ("main temple"), also designated by him as *chos skor*. The physical dynamic perception of sacred space representing the progression within an inner spiritual development is a typical feature of Vajrayāna Buddhism (see below).

detailed plans of ground plans and elevations (see [www.archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Nyarma/nyarma3.html](http://www.archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Nyarma/nyarma3.html); accessed April 29, 2013). More comprehensive research on the remaining structures of Nyarma are by Gerald Kozicz (2007, 2009, 2010a and 2010b) and Feiglstorfer (2010). Kozicz provided detailed floor plans of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* and various other monuments of the compound. (For further plans by Kozicz see also: [http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/media/forum/Berlin\\_conf\\_paper07/kozicz\\_berlinpap.pdf](http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/media/forum/Berlin_conf_paper07/kozicz_berlinpap.pdf).)

<sup>4</sup> The narrative programmes in the different spaces represents increasing spiritual levels as described by Luczanits (2010). I am grateful to Eva Allinger for discussions on this topic.



An additional new perspective—as already mentioned—is provided by recent archaeological research. Nyarma has been surveyed in detail by the archaeologist Quentin Devers, who was the first to chart the remains (residential buildings and religious structures) of that site.<sup>5</sup> The data of archaeologists are required to specify the

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Devers included the remains of residential architecture in his archaeological research and survey on Nyarma (see Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume, pp. 214–216), both featuring all-stone corbelled structures. The all-stone building at Nyarma was first described by Neil Howard in 1989. See for images also “Flight of the Khyung” by John V. Bellezza (<http://www.tibetarchaeology.com>; accessed May 7, 2013).



historical stratigraphy of the remains of the main temple and to analyse the temple’s wider layout.<sup>6</sup> In this article some aspects of the analysis of the entrance space—which has been modified, enlarged and transformed in later periods—as well as questions regarding the remains of the interior decoration are results of discussions with Devers.<sup>7</sup>

#### The “Shrine-Chamber”: “*garbhagr̥ha*” Versus “*caityagr̥ha*”

The *gtsug lag khang* of Tabo (Figs. 5–6) and Nyarma are exemplary of composite religious functions in the tradition of classical tripartite *vihāra* structures, i.e. longitudinal temples with entrance hall, assembly hall and shrine at the rear. However, while their religious symbolisms and functions may be comparable, the sizes and shapes of the individual structures within each of the two temples at Tabo and Nyarma differ considerably, suggesting diverging cultural contexts.

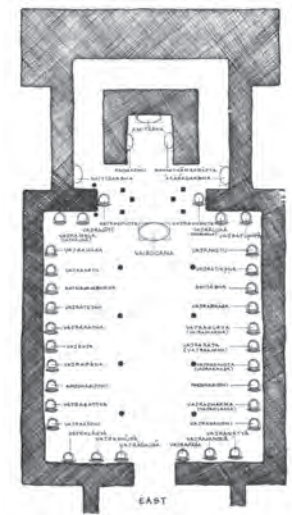
As regards the spatial concept, the shrine chamber (*dri gtsang khang*) of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* is comparable to that of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* (Fig. 7) as already observed by several authors.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, fragments of sculptures and wall-paintings might perhaps be found in the debris in future, providing important clues for questions of chronology.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Quentin Devers for his generosity in sharing his insights with me.

5. Tabo *gtsug lag khang*: ‘*du khang*’ clay sculptures attached on the walls (C. Kalantari, 2009).

6. Tabo *gtsug lag khang*: ‘*du khang*’ (C. Kalantari, 2002).



7. Tabo *gtsug lag khang* (plan after R. Khosla 1979: fig. 2 on p. 44).



8. Udaipur, Mirkulā Devī temple, Lahaul: view of the *garbhagrha* with the sheltering *torāṇa* (C. Kalantari, 2002; WHAV).

9. Tabo *gtsug lag khang*: detail of decorative elements on passage from assembly hall (*du khang*) to sanctum (*dri gtsang khang* and *skor lam*) (H. Feiglstorfer, 2019).

Luczanits (2004: 307, n. 118) summarised the main features as follows: “The ground plan of the inner part of the temple at Nyarma is very similar to that of the Tabo Main Temple (*gTsug-lag-khang*; [...]), but niches were added to the three sides of the ambulatory, and the opening between the main hall and the apse is comparatively narrow. One of the niches preserves the remains of a large circular aureole and a pointed nimbus which project considerably beyond its upper edge.”

The architectonic arrangement of both temples features spaces along a main axis and a horizontal hierarchy of sacred spaces leading to a cella. While the Tabo sanctum’s walls are higher, Nyarma is placed on a raised platform as observed by Feiglstorfer (“The architecture of the Buddhist temple complex of Nyarma”, this volume, Fig. 50, p. 253) both features signifying that the cella is imagined as spiritually elevated. The horizontal, axial orientation in the inner core leading to a cella stands in clear contrast to the—roughly contemporaneous—centralised plan of the so-called Ye shes ‘od temple (or Gyatsa



[brGya rtsa]) at Tholing, with a cult image at its centre—the latter appears to have a different iconographic and cultic function. The oblong tripartite shape also differs from the multi-storey structure of Shalu (Zhwa lu) in Central Tibet (ca. 1030), having a vertical hierarchy, described as a *maṇḍala* and representation of Mount Sumeru (Chayet 1988: 23). The longitudinal-type of temples at Nyarma and Tabo combine a monastic function with a ritual function for public and congregational forms of devotion. In particular, the longitudinal shape and the spatial order at Tabo recalls the axial succession of halls (entrance hall, assembly hall) leading to a *sanctum sanctorum* or shrine-chamber (*garbhagrha*, or womb chamber) for perambulation, recalling the Buddhist and Hindu religious landscape of Lahaul and Chamba known for their wooden temples complete with magnificent *torāṇas* as a lead-in and gateway to the sanctum. In this context it has to be mentioned that as regards the internal programme at Tabo, featuring a distinctive hierarchy in the religious programme, there are commonalities with cave temples of Ajanta (Ajaṅṭā), e.g. Cave XVII (see below),<sup>8</sup> although no direct genetic link is postulated here. The Hindu and Buddhist wooden temples in the bordering regions of Himachal Pradesh are in close geographical and historical proximity. Examinations of the structures of the latter—typically featuring a *garbhagrha* with sheltering *torāṇas* (gateways) combined with a *maṇḍapa* (a pillared hall for public rituals)—and their decorations reveal significant commonalities with Tabo (Papa-Kalantari 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The latter consisting of entrance hall, assembly hall and sanctum at the rear of the temple.

As a characteristic element, the ceiling programme of the cella at Tabo has a centralised, mandalic layout, featuring airborne offering divinities venerating the cult image below between large lotus rosettes, and auspicious symbols in the corners, giving this space a vertical direction of ascent, almost reminiscent of a *śikhara*<sup>9</sup> typically positioned above the *garbagrha*. This ceiling design is opposed to the decoration of the wooden planks above the main hall, with its ornamental depictions imitating a textile cover protecting a pillared hall, recalling the *maṇḍapa* in Indian temples.<sup>10</sup> The wall above the Tabo cella's entrance portal features Indic and Hindu deities (stemming from the mid-11<sup>th</sup>-century renovation phase) in their function as protectors, who typically occupy the entrance wall of a temple. Accordingly, a hierarchy of divinities is shown in this room, indicating that the shrine chamber with its perambulation is perceived as a separate unified sacred space.<sup>11</sup>

At Tabo much of the ceiling decoration above the shrine and ambulatory are reminiscent of the architectural ornamentation in Himachal Pradesh, such as at Udaipur<sup>12</sup> and Ribba (Lotsāba *lha khang*), the latter featuring large lotus rosettes and airborne spirits on the ambulatory's ceiling. In general, along the processional axis to the shrine chamber a progression in elaboration and size of ceiling decorations is observable, and their motifs indicate how these spaces were conceived. Particularly significant for comparison are the elements on the transition zone between the assembly hall and the sanctum at Tabo, featuring a complex tripartite doorway with pilasters (Fig. 9). The surface decorations in this area have the most elaborate detailed ornamentation in the temple. They do not appear to imitate textiles but rather architectural decorations such as the woodcarvings on *torāṇas* (monumental gateways), which are a constant feature in the wooden temples mentioned (Fig. 8; cf. Kalantari, "Shaping space, constructing identity. The illuminated *Yum chen mo* manuscript at Pooh, Kinnaur", this volume, Fig. 22, p. 373). At Tabo characteristic features of such richly carved portals seem to be translated into the medium of painting with the aim of sacralising

and spiritually elevating the sanctum<sup>13</sup> intended to lead into spaces of increasing sacredness.

While the decorations of the various spaces at Tabo indicate a hierarchic relationship leading through a *torāṇa* into a (dark) enclosure or shrine chamber for the focus of worship, at Nyarma these units of assembly hall and shrine chamber are more clearly distinguished at the level of the architectonic layout—as already observed by Luczanits (2004).

The shrine at Nyarma—with a central (square) chamber (*dri gtsang khang*) and surrounding ambulatory (*skor lam*)—has a distinctive contrasting feature, namely projections or niches on three sides of the ambulatory, vesting the space with a cosmological dimension. Various authors have described this fact but without tracing its architectonic context and meaning. Luczanits (*ibid.*) mentions that one of the niches preserves the remains of a large circular aureole. Thus Nyarma's programme of the shrine must have been considerably more complex than the ambulatory of the small enclosure at Tabo, where no niches can be found.

Nyarma shares this type of projections in particular with Buddhist cult buildings in the Trans-Indus region and in particular in Kashmir and Lower Ladakh, i.e. zones geographically and culturally closely linked. Also the sanctum and its relation to the assembly hall has characteristic features recalling building traditions of that region.<sup>14</sup>

One example is the Buddhist complex of Parihāsapura, an enclosed monastic compound near Srinagar related to royal patronage of Lalitāditya (Mukhtāpīḍa) from the Kārkoṭa dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> Parihāsapura is in particular renowned for a colossal Buddha image in the *vihāra*, which still existed in Kalhaṇa's time (12<sup>th</sup> century) and which according to some scholars is perhaps depicted inside a pent-roof structure in the Alchi Sumtsek (Goepper 1996: 83).<sup>16</sup> At Parihāsapura the buildings for worship (*stūpa*, *caitya*) and

<sup>13</sup> The magnificent portal of Khorchag attests to the continuation and significance of this tradition in the overall designs of temples in Western Tibet (see Kalantari 2012b: 150f).

<sup>14</sup> Meister and Dhaky (1988: 356) describe the main features of Kashmir temples thus: "The plan of a Kashmir temple is characterized by an open rectangular courtyard surrounded by cells and an elevated [...] shrine at the centre facing a prominent entrance gateway. [...] The typical pent-roofed central structure of a Kashmiri temple has pedimented entries on four sides, three of which are often closed off or turned into niches."

<sup>15</sup> Romi Khosla was among the first architecture historians to point to the relationship between architectural motifs of that site with the Alchi Sumtsek, in particular the trefoil arches, a leitmotif of Kashmir architecture (1979: 57; cf. also Meister and Dhaky 1988: figs. 724–726).

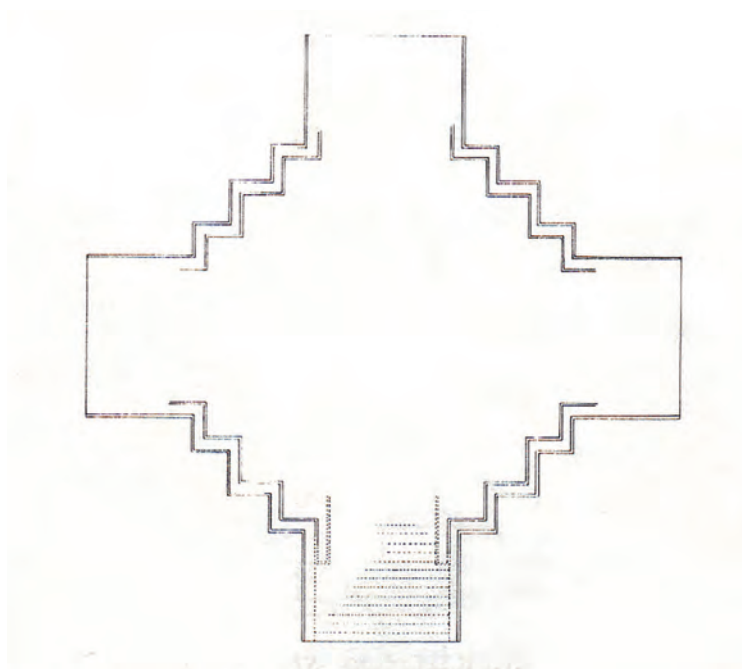
<sup>16</sup> R. C. Kak (2002: 52–53) described the Buddhist monastery at Parihāsapura: "Of the monasteries there is little to be said, as only one example survives—

<sup>9</sup> The *śikhara*, a tower or spire, a dominant feature in North Indian temple structures, is imagined as equated with the central deity in Indian temple architecture.

<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to trace the evolutionary history of this architectural theme, a relationship to the Indic traditions in Himachal Pradesh and the Indian plains has been suggested (cf. Papa-Kalantari 2007: 154ff.).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also Luczanits and Neuwirth (2010: 81) who found a parallel interpretation of the different storeys of the Alchi Sumtsek (gSum brtsegs).

<sup>12</sup> Udaipur (Mirkulā Devī temple, Lahaul) has a lantern ceiling with elaborate figural and ornamental woodcarvings above the *maṇḍapa* (Papa-Kalantari 2007). I wish to thank Rob Linrothe (2003) for discussions on this topic.



10. Parihāsapura *stūpa*  
(after Fisher 1989: fig. 11).

11. Parihāsapura *stūpa*  
(after Kottkamp 1992: fig. 161).

namely, the Rajavihara of Parihasapura. In plan it is a cellular quadrangle facing a rectangular courtyard. The cells were preceded by an open veranda. In the middle of one side was the flight of steps which afforded an entrance and exit. The central cell on this side served as the vestibule. In the range of cells on the opposite side is a set of more spacious rooms which served either as a refectory or as the abbot's private apartments. Externally, and probably internally also, the walls were plain. The roof was probably sloping, and gabled like modern roofs in Kashmir. Parihasapura has also bequeathed to us the only surviving example of a Buddhist chaitya, or temple. It is a square chamber built upon a square base similar to that of the stupa, save for the offsets and three stairs, and is enclosed by a plain wall, with entrance facing the temple stairs. The stairs lead up to the portico which gave admission to the sanctum. The latter was an open chamber surrounded on all sides by a narrow corridor which served as a circumambulatory path. At the four corners of the sanctum are bases of pillars which no doubt held some sort of screen designed partly to conceal the Holy of Holies from profane eyes. As the external wall of the corridor has been almost razed to the ground, it is very difficult to say whether there were openings in it for admission of light and air; probably there were."

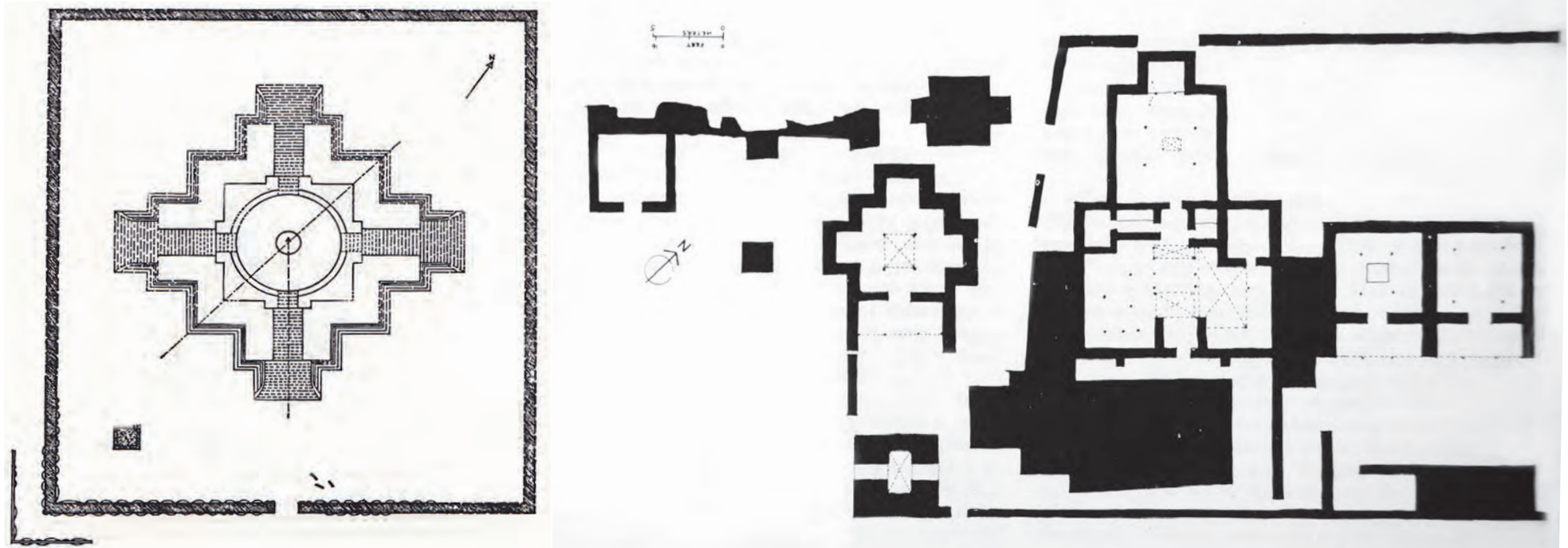
R. Fisher (1989: 22) describes Parihāsapura as "evidence of the creation of a new, composite structure where the traditionally separate buildings used for worship (*chaityas*—halls) and residences for monks (viharas) are joined into one." The *stūpa* of cruciform plan, and monks cells around it created a composite structure. "The stupa was thus moved inside the vihara, occupying the centre position and thereby creating a temple." (*ibid.*: 23). On the Ushkur *stūpa* (5<sup>th</sup> century) Fisher (*ibid.*: 23) writes it "is cruciform in plan [or rather a square centre with projections; my addition, CK], with stairs on each of the four sides", on a high plinth, the "configuration, featuring the four stairs, high plinth and cells built into the enclosure, constitutes a distinct, regional type. It is seldom found

the residence/congregation of monks (*vihāra*) are joined into one temple area (Fisher 1989: 22ff). Particularly significant is the "star-shape"<sup>17</sup> of the *stūpa* at this site—representing a distinctive feature in this region—as focus of devotion through circumambulation and internal worship. The characteristic form consists of a square

on the Indian subcontinent, where the single stairway and circular-plinth types dominate. Some similarity can be found in the late eighth-century eastern India Buddhist vihara at Paharpur, which does use this type of platform, but this is not typical, and the Paharpur platform, with its small shrines, attached, is different from any found in Kashmir. The geographically closest parallel (...) is found in the nearby Central Asian site of Khotan. The Rawak vihara, dated to the fourth or fifth century, exhibits the same structural features", i.e. cells within the surrounding wall (*ibid.*: 23–24).

Several authors have remarked that *stūpas* with four projecting stairs are often found in Gandhāra, and became popular in the Trans-Indus regions including Kashmir, Central Asia and Afghanistan (Tepe Rustam in Balkh, Rawak in Khotan; cf. Fig. 12), a type which continued in Ladakh and Tibet (Kuwayama 2008: 170ff.).

<sup>17</sup> The term star-form is more appropriate, while the frequent designation as "cross or cruciform" should be avoided, as the association with Christian-Byzantine building forms is misleading; the *stūpa* is a centralised space with lateral projections which are not part of the actual shrine. The sanctum in the church is not at the centre but at the rear, in the apse, while the transept has the function of additional space for monks and emphasises the sacrality of the apse; also the Christian catholic connotation of the cross and its relation to the building form appears to be misplaced in a Buddhist context.



space or chamber with lateral niches or stairs (and recessing corners) symbolically allowing access for the devotee from all directions of the world (cf. Figs. 10–11).<sup>18</sup> The Caṅkuṇa *stūpa* (of *pāñcaratha* design) features a rectangular base or plinth with offset projections for the steps on the four sides recalling this universal, cosmic orientation also found at Nyarma, the latter featuring niches in the ambulatory.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of *stūpa* worship and assembly of monks is also reflected in the *caitya* hall of Parihāsapura, featuring a shrine on a square base with lateral niches on three sides.<sup>20</sup> A related composite function has a “caitya hall” at Nyarma (cf. Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume, Fig. 5, p. 204, and Fig. 26, p. 212; cf. also Kozicz 2010b: fig. 6, who calls this composite structure the “Stūpa (Chorten) Temple”). There a *stūpa* occupies the space at the rear of the hall of this smaller structure, which may stem from a slightly later phase than the main temple.

<sup>18</sup> For further images see Fisher 1989: 26ff; Meister and Dhaky 1988: 366.

<sup>19</sup> Maillard (1983: 170) assumed that the form of the central shrine with four stairways, the ‘star-shaped *stūpa*’ developed between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries in border regions between Central Asia and north-west India (such as Khotan) in connection with the propagation of tantric teachings and rituals.

<sup>20</sup> The latter, of course, is in the tradition of a classical building type of early Mahāyāna cult in India such as at Ajanta.

### The Spatial Symbolism of the *stūpa*: from Monolithic Structure to Cultic Space<sup>21</sup>

Of crucial importance for the reconstruction of the architectonic context of the Nyarma shrine complex is the development of the *stūpa* and *stūpa* temples of Ladakh in particular. Kottkamp (1992: 420ff) described the evolutionary history of the *stūpa* from a monolithic structure for circumambulation to a cultic space with integrated, centrally organised internal shrines for external and internal worship. In his retracing of the transformation of the spatial symbolism of the *stūpa* in India, the placing of niches (with cult images placed in the respective position in the cardinal directions) attached to the dome or plinth can be regarded as an intermediary phase, which gradually led to an intrusion of cult images into the dome (*ibid.*: 421).

The extent to which building forms of sacred structures in Ladakh are related to the spatial idea of the *stūpa* with internal shrines or *stūpas* can be seen in the entrance *stūpa/kakani* (*ka ka ni*) *stūpa* or “Great Stūpa” at Alchi as well as the “Four-Image *mchod rten*” at Mangyu (Fig. 17);<sup>22</sup> the latter featuring projecting niches inside and

<sup>21</sup> I wish to thank Eva Allinger (2012) and Gerald Kozicz (2009) for discussion on this topic.

<sup>22</sup> A variety of Kashmir-style building forms for shrines and sacred spaces for cult images can be found on the *dhoti* of the Sumtsek’s Avalokiteśvara featuring

12. Khotan, Rawak *stūpa* (after Kottkamp 1992: fig. 156).

13. Alchi, monastic compound (after Khosla 1975: fig. on p. 75).

14. Nyarma: *mchod rten* (10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century) in the Nyarma compound (C. Kalantari, 2009).

15. Nyarma: Temple 4 (ca. 11<sup>th</sup> century), view from back side (C. Kalantari, 2009).

16. Nyarma: *mchod rten* (13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century) with internal decorations (C. Kalantari, 2009).



an inner *stūpa* for circumambulation. These structures are typically covered with internal decorations like those of temples.<sup>23</sup> An example at Nyarma of this type is a still intact *stūpa* temple, presumably from the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 16).<sup>24</sup>

Concerning the presumptive ritual use and forms of devotion associated with the *stūpa* at that time it is important to note that the *stūpa* was not only associated with the relics of the Buddha but above all represented a form par excellence to materialise Vajrayāna ideas. In tantric Buddhism the interiors of shrines in *stūpas* are perceived as a *dharmadhātu* circle used for ritual actions and for symbolic “entry” into the *dharmadhātu*. Such ideas can be found in relevant tantric texts, e.g. in the *Kriyāsaṃgraha* (12<sup>th</sup> century; cf. Kottkamp 1992: 423). As Goepper put it (1979: 252), while in Exoteric Buddhism pagodas and cult-halls are dwelling places of the Buddhas, in Esoteric Buddhism, they are symbolic embodiments of the realization within oneself; the movement inside is equal to a realisation of *buddhatā*; Goepper (*ibid.*) describes these spaces as representations of the “absolute reality of mind”.

As described by Kottkamp (1992: 462) in the late tantric form of Buddhism, the Vajrayāna, the *stūpa* was perceived as a *yantra*, i.e. as a tool or instrument for the religious path, realised as actual paths, surrounding the *stūpa* as corridors and as ambulation paths, which serves the devotee for the physical understanding of the stages of meditation, which has an equivalent in the two-dimensional form of the *maṇḍala* (*dkyil 'khor*).<sup>25</sup>

A building form that is typologically related to the star-shaped *stūpa* are structures with three projecting niches and a central *stūpa* for ambulation. As can be seen in the Alchi Sumtsek (gSum brtsegs) (Fig. 13) the latter are occupied by monumental bodhisattvas in clay.

temples with pyramidal or pent-roofs and a single-chamber temple of *pāñcayātana* type similar to the five-towered *kakani stūpa* at Alchi (cf. Goepper 1996: 55). Cf. also a ca. 14<sup>th</sup>-century *stūpa* at Nyarma with a lantern roof and painted programme (Fig. 16.)

<sup>23</sup> The “Four-Image *mchod rten*” at Mangyu contains a large chamber with paintings and sculptures. The latter feature Protectors of the Three Families (*rigs gsum mgon po*) placed in four niches in the upper section of the side walls (cf. Luczanits 2004: 170).

<sup>24</sup> A comparison with a *stūpa* at Nyarma (Fig. 14), denominated as “Stupa 4” by Kozicz, is also relevant for the reconstruction of the typology and meaning of the shrine chamber of the Nyarma main temple and its star shape with inner and outer ambulatory (for images and a description see <http://stupa.arch-research.at/cms/index.php?id=111>; accessed May 2, 2013). In his short presentation of the site the author describes a plinth of cruciform plan and two flights of steps, again in cruciform or star shape.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. also Snodgrass (1985: 126ff) for examples of *stūpas* as *maṇḍalas*; furthermore Tucci 1988a: xviiif.



In the Nyarma compound is situated a structure (Fig. 15; cf. Devers, "An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh", this volume, Fig. 6: Temples 3 and 4, p. 204; classified as an "Initiation Temple" by Kozicz 2010b: fig. 6) one square and one with lateral niches recalling the Alchi Sumtsek. Thus the functions of worship related to the star-shaped temple (Temple 4) and the assembly hall (Temple 3) appear to be separated and represented in two single buildings. The dates of these two constructions are unknown, but they may perhaps be from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, although the two spaces are positioned in close relation to each other, they are not erected on one axis, and thus show no consideration of a symbolic alignment or relationship.

A feature indicative for the comparison with Nyarma can also be seen in the *vihāra* at the Kashmiri Buddhist complex of Parihāsapura. Like the Nyarma assembly hall, the latter has a square ground plan contrasting to the oblong shape of Tabo, which also contrasts on account to its much smaller size. The Kashmiri *vihāra* is situated immediately to the south of the *stūpa* and has a shrine at the rear wall vaguely comparable to the main image in the 'du *khang* of Nyarma.

As a working hypothesis it can be proposed that early Buddhist Kashmiri building forms of ensembles of *vihāras* and related shrines or *stūpa* types with internal shrines (on raised platforms) in a sacred compound, reflecting traditions of devotion consecrated through tradition—i.e. the cult of the *stūpa* for public and congregational worship—have to be considered among the possible forerunners of early West Tibetan building forms in Ladakh. Also the outstanding quality and precision of the temple recalls the fine masonry of ancient Kashmir. In the earliest phase of temple architecture in this region, Kashmiri Buddhist temples associated with prestigious royal foundations, representing distinct regional types of building forms, may have been translated into indigenous West Tibetan construction techniques of mud bricks and timber.

The complex layouts of early constructions at Tabo and Nyarma appear to feature rather conservative architectonic ensembles and forms of devotion with shrine chambers as foci of worship. Successive structures show a unification and systematisation of sacred space, featuring centralised architectonic concepts. This coincides with the appearance of Five-Family group configurations around Vairocana. Exemplary is the free-standing, four-fold Vairocana image (ca. mid-11<sup>th</sup> century) in the assembly hall at Tabo.<sup>26</sup> In this centralised conception

<sup>26</sup> This concept contrasts to the older Three-Family configuration in the cella of Tabo from the foundation period.

The adoption of conservative building types in this early phase is in line with internal decorative programmes and the emphasis on early Mahāyāna concepts and Yoga Tantra teachings in this period of "translation and transformation": e.g.



the entrance hall of Tabo features a complex programme of protectors, local spirits and donors engaged in rituals of consecration and a Wheel of Rebirth and cosmological imagery, as prescribed in Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*. Extensive narratives are shown in the main hall, representing higher spiritual attainments of didactic purpose. The latter are rendered prominently and are designed to bring different forms of virtuous life to the mind of the devotee, characteristic of this early phase of establishment of Buddhist ideas in the region. In contrast, in later phases of this architectural tradition, single-chamber structures with niches at the opposite side of the portal emerge transforming the complex composite structures to single-chamber temples with a niche in the rear wall of the 'du *khang* featuring the main theme of the overall programme. Thus, in the same way as the internal programmes show a shift from Three-Family configurations (with a central Buddha and flanking bodhisattvas) to Five-Buddha-Family configurations in this period, with Vairocana as the core deity presiding over the Vajradhātu *mahāmaṇḍala*, the spatial layouts of temples are also gradually systematised and transformed to single-chamber structures. This period of systematisation coincides with the reduction of narrative didactic scenes, while fully developed *maṇḍala* palaces for ritual and initiation depicted on the side walls of the assembly halls become a dominant feature of interior programmes. This transformation of space and programme may also indicate a change and division of functions related to different types of spaces: one reserved for monastic use, thereby conservative forms of devotion such as the worship of the Buddha through a meditative circumambulation and honouring of the Buddha with offerings of the cult image in shrines, appears to lose importance, and iconographic programmes leading the practitioner around the

17. Mangyu: Decorated *mchod rten* (after Luczanits 2004: fig. 185).



18. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*  
(Q. Devers, 2009).

sacred space spreads from the centre to the cardinal four directions. Often positioned below an opening or lantern, allowing light to come in, such configurations recall the meaning of the name Vairocana “resplendent, exceedingly bright” and forms of his representation as Sūrya, the sun-god at Lalung and Khorchag (Kalantari 2012b: 157; cf. also Luczanits 2004: 208). This spatial concept contrasts with the (dark) shrine chamber in the previous period, in which the cult image is a focus of devotion protected from direct gaze of the devotee. In a later phase of the evolutionary history, small structures reserved for

temple in a dynamic way are also less prominent, which made it possible to pay homage to the cult images of the side walls of the temple and by bowing down or walking below them. At that time a division of the ritual-cultic functions is observable in Nyarma and Ladakh. At Alchi specific types of building forms, namely small multi-storey sanctuaries, “*stūpa* shrines” and small sanctuaries with a cult image at the centre, are focus of public and congregational worship, which are found in one monastic complex with large assembly-halls-cum-veranda or a courtyard for monastic use and rituals involving the community in larger ceremonies and festivals.

a three-dimensional free-standing cult image emerge (Lalung, Alchi and perhaps Nyarma), while in contemporary assembly halls the old form of the “shrine chamber” is “condensed” into shallow niches in which there are typically complex Five-Family clay configurations virtually covering all the three walls of the niche (Nako, Alchi ‘Du khang), thus generating a three-dimensional configuration.

The evolutionary history and the intermediary phases of transfer and transformation leading to the specific formulation of the shrine-cum-*vihāra* type in the earliest foundations of Nyarma have to be established in future research.<sup>27</sup>

### The Assembly Hall

As already mentioned, the square ground plan differs from the oblong assembly hall at Tabo, vaguely recalling the Parihāsapura *vihāra* in Kashmir with a chamber at rear for worship.

Concerning the internal programme, little has been preserved of the original decoration in the main temple. In the middle of a floor covered with debris there is a throne<sup>28</sup> (Figs. 18–20) on which Gergan was still able to identify a lotus pedestal. The throne is placed on the main axis, shifted towards the western end of the main hall, and consists of a flat backdrop which is strengthened by layers of additional bricks behind and a pedestal placed in front of it. Thus the cult image was once orientated towards the main hall, virtually heading the assembly of monks during ceremonies. As already mentioned, this concept contrasts with the fourfold Vairocana of the renovation phase (11<sup>th</sup> century) in the Tabo assembly hall presiding over the thirty-two sculptures along the walls representing the main deities of a Vajradhātu *maṇḍala*.

Clay sculptures decorating the walls at Nyarma were reserved for the entrance wall and the one leading to the cella. On these walls are remains of nimbs and aureoles (*prabhāmaṇḍala*) and the holes (Figs. 18; 22–23) where these sculptures were fixed. The fragments of reliefs appear to be of considerable antiquity. As already observed

<sup>27</sup> An important question of future research is the definition of a typology of different structural themes, their function and symbolism. This study requires a plurality of approaches in order to arrive at a definition of the interrelation of built realities and more abstract ideals and religious concepts and their developments, which also have consequences for the changing meanings of building forms. Thus future research on Nyarma certainly has to combine historic sources and data from different disciplines: historiography, religious studies, architecture, art history and archaeology. We also require more evidence on the ancient political and religious affiliations, and the possible consequences it had on the choice of architectural types and spiritual programmes.

<sup>28</sup> According to local saying the base is regarded as a former *stūpa* (cf. Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume, p. 207).

by Luczanits (2004: 30), the absence of mural traces underneath may indicate that they derive from the foundation period of the temple itself. The shape with characteristic flames encircling a pearl border is comparable to the aureoles on the walls of the Tholing Gyatsa documented by Tucci. The holes and fragments of aureoles on the rear wall flanking the portal are arranged in two registers. There are four halos on each side (cf. Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume, p. 207). It is possible that they once were subordinate to the image on the throne in the centre (see below).<sup>29</sup>

As already mentioned, the Tabo *'du khang* has sculptures attached to both the rear and the side walls (Fig. 5), which is not the case at Nyarma. The Tabo sculptures are raised ca. 160 cm from the current ground level, indicating a form of worship through a meditative walk under these sculptures—paying homage and receiving their blessings—and thus giving a lead to the circumambulation of the temple and dynamic perception of its programme (Kalantari 2016).<sup>30</sup> The practice of veneration through respectful greeting and bowing down in front of the image in veneration, touching the feet of the sculpture, can be found in relevant texts such as the *Divyāvādāna*, describing different sets of efficacious rituals in the temple (cf. Rotman 2009: 53). The shrine or niche as well as the *stūpa* are typically the focus of the cult of the Buddha, where his image is venerated and honoured through circumambulation as well as through offerings to achieve merits. In later Vajrayāna Buddhism the shrine chamber represents the *dharma* body of the Buddha.<sup>31</sup> Measurements by Devers show that the nimbs on the wall leading to the shrine-chamber are ca. 120 cm from the original ground level, thus a ritual function of meditative walk below these images is rather unlikely (cf. Fig. 23).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The ensemble perhaps featured the Eight Bodhisattvas surrounding a central Buddha, but this must remain speculation.

<sup>30</sup> The narrative programme has increasing spiritual levels as described by Luczanits (2010).

<sup>31</sup> The offerings are laid in front of or placed on a small altar. As described by Gombrich (1995: 145ff) this gesture of respect shows that the gods are perceived as being present in the sculptures, and live in the cult image from the moment of its consecration. Donor images reflecting these “conservative” ritual actions are typically depicted in close relation to respective cult images. Examples are images in the Tabo sanctum, showing donations of flowers, while donor images at Nako and Alchi include incense, ceremonial scarves and jewels.

<sup>32</sup> Comparisons with earlier traditions of Buddhist temples predating Western Himalayan temples in Kinnaur (Ribba, Lotsāba *lha khang*, 9<sup>th</sup> century) are also relevant in this context: the wooden temple of Ribba features a *garbhagṛha* with outer ambulatory path; the shrine shows sculptures attached in elevated position on side walls: they comprise seven clay sculptures, which in 2002 were in a massively altered state. Some of them are perhaps later additions. Only the main deity is perhaps an original, featuring Avalokiteśvara like the central deity



19. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: side view of central throne (C. Kalantari, 2009).



20. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: assembly hall (*'du khang*), back view of central throne (C. Kalantari, 2009).

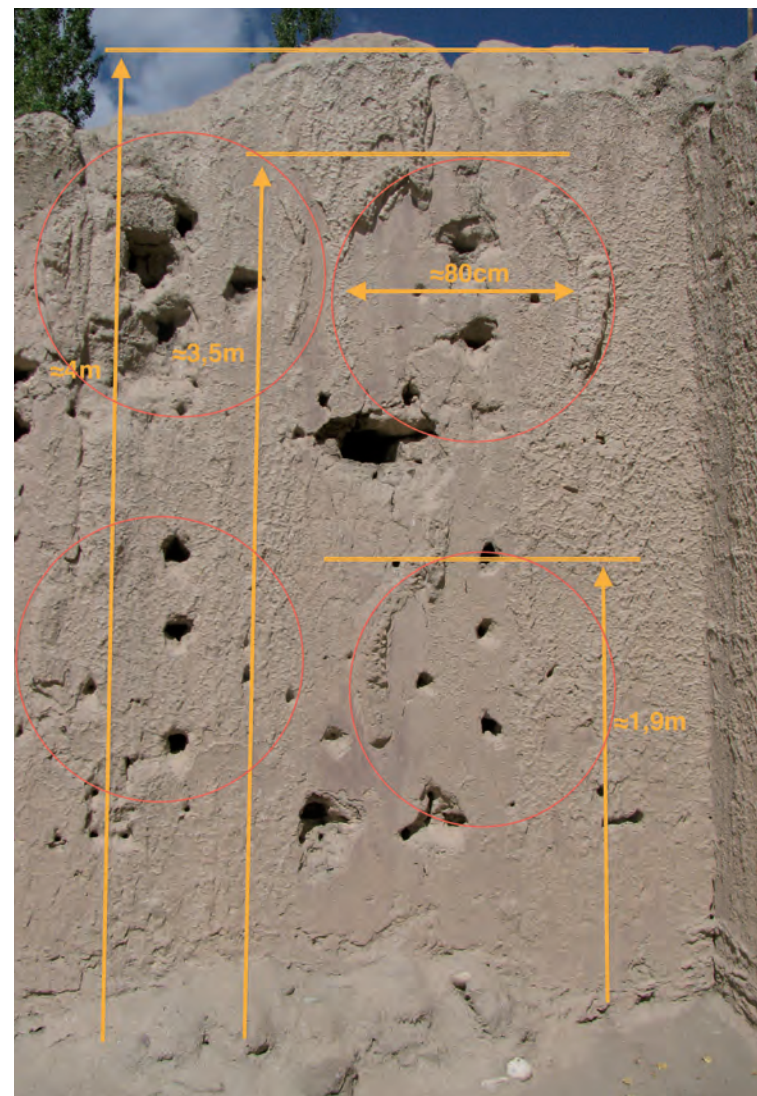


21. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: view from assembly hall (*'du khang*) to entrance wall (C. Kalantari, 2009).

22. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: assembly hall (*du khang*): view on rear wall of assembly hall (passage to sanctum) showing fragments of aureoles and nimbs (C. Kalantari, 2009).



23. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: assembly hall (*du khang*): view on rear wall of assembly hall (passage to sanctum) with graphic illustration of sizes and position of aureoles for clay sculptures (photo and drawing Q. Devers, 2012).



On the entrance wall there are large halos with nimbs. The position recalls the usual configurations of monumental gate-keepers, who

on the portal. The sculptures perhaps give impression of an original programme and ritual use of the cella: the seven clay sculptures are 120–140 cm from the current ground, giving a lead for the devotee to a inner circumambulation; the height may indicate the form of devotion as veneration in clockwise direction, either bowing in front or walking under it. This construction form is seldom found in temples post-dating Tabo. It may be derived from wooden sculptures as frequently found in other early temples. The temple also shares elements of the ceiling composition, namely aerial deities combined with lotus rosettes with the Tabo ambulatory and cella ceiling. The portal is in many ways reminiscent of the Khorchag door frame (cf. Kalantari 2012b: 149f).

typically live near the entrance. Comparable early examples are found in many places, such as in the Nyag cave temple at Khartse (mKhar rtse, etc.) (Tshe ring rgyal po and Papa-Kalantari 2009).

The cella or apse (Figs. 24–25) to the west of the throne in the main hall is empty with the exception of a pedestal, which was used in former times as the throne of the local territorial deity, identified by Gergan's informants as Dorje Chenmo (rDo rje chen mo).<sup>33</sup> Spots

<sup>33</sup> See Jahoda, "Joseph Thsertan Gergan's report on Nyarma, 1917", this volume, pp. 175, A small temple—built on top of the remains of the cella dedicated to this local protectress—is still in use up to the present day (Figs. 26–27).

of colour in the small room, as described by Gergan, seem to have disappeared and also the halo behind and above the throne mentioned in his account was not visible to the author in 2009.<sup>34</sup> The age of the throne is unclear and also its original function. Archaeological information might help in the future. The niches of the ambulatory around the cella contain further remains of halos (Luczanits 2004) indicating that there must once have been sculptures for worship during circumambulation, perhaps protector gods. The latter were no longer visible to the author either.

### The Veranda

From the existence of sections of the ambulatory that project from the level of the temple (ca. 2.8 m, Quentin Devers, verbal communication) we can relatively safely conclude that there was once an entrance hall or a niche, recalling the entrance hall at Tabo (cf. Kalantari, “Hārītī and Pāñcika at Tabo”, this volume, Fig. 3, p. 303).<sup>35</sup> In general, the size and complexity of the temple suggests that the entrance to the temple may once have been protected. At Nyarma characteristic holes on the entrance wall can be identified, confirming this hypothesis. Typically, the timber beams of a vestibule are positioned in holes of this type and position, indicating a covered space in front of the main hall. However, according to Devers, the age of these holes is uncertain. In addition, recesses on the uppermost zone of the wall can be observed—although not as pronounced as in front of the lateral temples—serving as a further indication of a former roof in front of the main hall. Due to the fact that the entrance wall underwent massive modifications it is impossible to arrive at a final conclusion on this point. Closer examination of the floor in this area is necessary in future to arrive at a better understanding of the original shape of the entrance hall, and it could perhaps reveal the bases of columns.<sup>36</sup> This entrance space may have once been protected by a wooden “portal-wall” comparable to the monumental wooden structure of the Khorchag IHa khang chen mo temple, although the latter was perhaps never free-standing, as can be concluded from the relatively unaltered condition of its



24. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: shrine-chamber with additional storey (later addition to historic layout) (C. Kalantari, 2009).

25. Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*: shrine-chamber (C. Kalantari, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Kozicz (2007: 41) writes about fragments of paint, but a documentation of these is unknown to the author.

<sup>35</sup> Of interest for a comparison in future research is also the veranda and courtyard attached to the *rājavihāra* in Parihāsapura (cf. Kak 2002: 53).

<sup>36</sup> According to Quentin Devers (verbal communication) the original wall projected 2.8 m in front of the temple. On both sides, the end of the wall is still there and the coat is still visible, showing that the wall was not destroyed in order to be extended. The later extensions were built directly against the original wall without modifying it. There are two tiny walls projecting from the ambulatory wall: however, the way they are preserved does not permit any conclusion as to whether they are original or not.

surface. Considering the width of this space at Nyarma, the existence of a wooden veranda protecting the façade is more likely, comparable to that found in front of the Alchi ‘Du khang’s entrance wall combined with a courtyard. At Alchi, however, the side-walls of the veranda are projections of the temple’s side walls, which is not the case at Nyarma. At present we have to rely on typological comparative information until we can obtain further detailed data from this site.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Archaeological research (Quentin Devers, verbal communication) cannot identify traces on the top of the entrance wall showing recesses, that is, the

26. The *lha khang* above the old sanctum with the local protectress as the focus of devotion: nun of Nyarma and ritual offerings (C. Kalantari, 2009).



Though little can be said about the shape and, of course, nothing about the interior programme of this space at Nyarma, the entrance hall at Nyarma is an important early example of a consistent spatial and iconographical theme in Western Himalayan temples. It

negative print of the timbers of the former roof protecting the vestibule or entrance hall (in contrast, on the right-hand side the top of the wall is wavy and punctuated with recesses where the timbers used to be). But, as Quentin Devers informed me, the top of the entrance wall is more blurred, because it was converted into the entrance hall, and also because it has more recently been flattened, so the question can only remain unanswered.

constitutes a component of a specific type of temple design and overall spiritual programme. The Tabo main temple (which perhaps had a comparable ritual function to the Nyarma main temple), with the dominant theme of the entrance hall and its interior painted programme intact, is a paradigm for the role of this space, reflecting an early stage of a tripartite system of entrance hall, main hall and sanctum. This spatial configuration is an expression of a specific, early Buddhist iconographic programme and of ritual practices of the period (see Kalantari, "Hārītī and Pāñcika at Tabo: On the metamorphosis of the protective couple in early Western Tibetan Buddhist temples", this volume, pp. 301–325).<sup>38</sup>

Typically, in the entrance halls of Tabo and Shalu in Central Tibet (the latter has the most complex form; ca. 1030) lay assemblies and didactic images are shown together with "lower spirits" and Indic deities in their function as protectors, headed by local territorial deities who watch over the portal to the sacred space of the *maṅḍala*. The donors or ruling elites are depicted as engaged in ritual actions and in various forms of devotion, perhaps commemorating the consecration of the temples.

The entrance wall of the Tabo *sgo khang* (or entrance hall) features a Wheel of Life as prescribed in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* concerning the decoration of the entrance hall of a temple flanked by a representation of the Buddha in *bhūmiśparśamudrā*. The accompanying text encourages the conversion to Buddhism and the following of the teaching of the Buddha. Another important function is related to the consecration of the temple as depicted at Tabo. The related rituals, perhaps carried out in this transition zone between the mundane and the sacred sphere, also appear to have involved rituals appeasing indigenous spirits depicted on the entrance wall of the Nyag cave temple at Khartse and in the corridor of the Zhag cave, and inviting the local spirits to act as guardians. Such rituals are mentioned in relevant tantric Buddhist texts (*Kriyāsaṃgraha*), which describe efficacious actions before erecting the temple and generating the *maṅḍala* (cf. Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari, "Guge kingdom-period murals in the Zhag grotto in mNga' ris, Western Tibet", this volume, pp. 413–414).

On the level of devotional practice, the tripartite structure also appears to reflect specific forms of Buddhist devotion, namely the practice of offerings, typically taking place in the entrance hall, which has a public function, and the courtyard in front. Lay persons were usually not present in the main hall during ceremonies by the

<sup>38</sup> The space of the entrance hall occupies an important position in the symbolism of the temple's structure and ritual life comparable to a narthex in Byzantine tradition.

monastic community. Donor depictions on the opposite side of the consecration scene in the Tabo entrance hall perhaps reflect such a form of devotion (cf. Kalantari, “Hārītī and Pāñcika at Tabo: On the metamorphosis of the protective couple in early Western Tibetan Buddhist temples”, this volume, Fig. 6, p. 305).<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the simpler longitudinal ground plan at Tabo, where the devotee is led through the spaces of increasing sacrality along a horizontal axis, the practitioner at Nyarma is first led from the entrance hall to the ambulatory path around the inner core of the sacred site. He then enters the main hall, from where he can proceed to the sanctum, which lies hidden behind the main icon in the main hall. There, a clear separation of the entrance hall plus ambulatory path and the main hall-cum-sanctum can be observed, perhaps reflecting different ritual functions and practices of devotion, recalling Vajrayāna perceptions of sacred space as tools for the spiritual path, as already mentioned. The addition of a large courtyard in front of the main hall in later periods flanked by side temples that can be reached from this open space is an indication that the public function of the temple reflected in the entrance hall continued in later periods and was even expanded.

In contrast, in the later monastic Buddhist tradition religious culture was transformed into more systematised forms with centralised layouts of assembly halls. Here the programme of the former entrance hall is partly depicted in a condensed form above the portals as shown at Khartse in the Nyag cave temple, and later integrated into the outer spheres of the *maṅḍala* depicted on the side walls of temples such as in the Nako Lotsāba *lha khang*. The entrance hall appears to have gradually lost its (iconographic) importance, coinciding with the tendency towards single-chamber centralised rooms with shallow niches at the rear end of the temple opposite the portal. In the evolutionary history of spatial unification of temples all dimensions of space are integrated into the overall programme. In this new development the temple’s accoutrements—including the ceilings as vertical openings to heaven as shown at Dungkar and Zhag—represent the Buddhist system of the universe (see Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari, “Guge kingdom-period murals in the Zhag grotto in mNga’ ris, Western Tibet”, this volume, pp. 421–422).

The theme of the veranda is a constant feature during various phases. An interesting example is the Alchi Sumtsek, which Luczanits



(2010) described as three superimposed temples each with a veranda. A comparable construction appears to have existed at Nyarma (cf. Kozicz 2010b: fig. 6, IT 1, IT2).

The complex architectural layout of Nyarma only features a niche in front of the temple façade (perhaps protected by a veranda as found inter alia at Alchi) reflecting the spatial, iconographic and ritual tradition of the entrance hall but in a different shape. However, the fact has to be acknowledged that Nyarma is typologically more closely linked to Lower Ladakh and Kashmir, and also that Tabo was a minor foundation. Accordingly, the meaningfulness of comparative studies between Tabo and the three great royal foundations (Nyarma, Khorchag and Tholing) is somewhat restricted.

With regard to the evolutionary history of West Tibetan temples, the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* stands typologically between the *gtsug lag khang* of Tabo and the Alchi ‘Du khang. While Nyarma shares with Tabo the mixed function of assembly hall and shrine for public and congregational worship featuring a longitudinal shape with a horizontal hierarchy plus a cella-cum-ambulatory, it also has features typical of structures in Lower Ladakh—namely an ambulation path around the temple and projecting niches in the ambulatory around the shrine. In contrast, the ‘Du khang at Alchi—of a later phase—has the usual tripartite system of a shallow entrance hall or niche, main hall and shallow sanctum featuring a configuration around

27. The *lha khang* above the old sanctum with the local protectress as the focus of devotion (C. Kalantari, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Christian Jahoda observed that the depictions of lay imagery in the Tabo entrance hall may reflect this practice. He also noted that this form of Buddhist devotion can still be observed in the entrance hall of the Jo khang of Khorchag during specific festivals.

Vairocana on its main and side walls, thus oriented virtually towards all the cardinal directions. In these later phases a separation of cultic functions is observable, as also shown in the Nyarma Temples 3 and 4 (facing each other; see the article by Quentin Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh” this volume, Figs. 21–24, p. 211).<sup>40</sup>

The ambulatory paths around this core complex at Nyarma have a corridor with a niche to the south (see Fig. 4). It is likely that there was also a niche on the northern side, thus forming a symmetrical arrangement of side extensions, which is a contrasting feature to Tabo but which several authors have compared with Alchi. In addition, at present there is a courtyard with lateral temples in front of the main hall. We can conclude from the interpretation of architectural remains by Feiglstorfer in combination with Quentin Devers’ archaeological research that the lateral chapels flanking the courtyard definitely *do not* belong to the original temple and that, due to the different composition of the bricks (see Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume, p. 205), the niches flanking the main hall cannot be safely attributed to the earliest structure (*ibid.*: Fig. 15, p. 208).<sup>41</sup> Thus an interpretation of its meaning in the context of a discussion of the evolutionary history of the oldest remaining structures does not appear to be useful.<sup>42</sup>

### The Overall Programme

Important information on the iconography of the three major royal foundations are given in literary sources, in particular in the *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs* (cf. Vitali 1996: 259ff.). According to these sources the deity on the throne of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* may have represented Buddha Dīpaṃkara (the Buddha of the Past). This theme often occurs in Gandhāran art and in Ajanta, but it appears to be highly unusual in the iconography of early Western Himalayan art. A configuration of a single Buddha or a group of the Buddhas of the Three Ages presiding the iconography was a common programme in Central Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Examples are in the temples of

<sup>40</sup> Concerning the date of Temples 3 and 4, the star-shaped and the rectangular buildings have “old” brick sizes (i.e. indicative of early periods), but according to Devers they may stem from different phases; the *stūpa* temple is also old, but if the *stūpa* positioned in the niche is original cannot be said with certainty according to archaeological research (*ibid.*).

<sup>41</sup> In his article Kozicz (2009: 18) proposes that the niches flanking the main hall do not belong to the original concept, while he includes those flanking the courtyard, although they can safely be excluded.

<sup>42</sup> At Parihāsapura the *vihāra* quadrangle is preceded by an open courtyard and an open veranda (Kak 2002: 53). A flight of steps afforded an entrance, to a certain extent recalling the raised position of the courtyard at Nyarma.

Yemar (g.Ye dmar) and Thig phyis (Southern Tibet; cf. Neumann 2008). The latter features Buddhas of the Three Ages flanked by the Eight Bodhisattvas on the side walls, while sculptures of protectors on the entrance wall guard the portal, and there is a *stūpa* at the centre. The comparatively early (9<sup>th</sup> century) Buddhist temple at Keru in the ‘On valley features Śākyamuni, flanked by bodhisattvas and large protectors on the entrance wall (cf. Jahoda and Kalantari 2009, and Jahoda and Kalantari, “Power and religion in pre-modern Western Tibet”, this volume, p. 37). Of interest is also a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Tibetan Buddhist historiography describing the erection of the Samye (bSam yas) temple, according to which there is a self-originated image of Śākyamuni flanked by the Eight Bodhisattvas on the ground floor of the great Central Cupola temple (dBu rtse chen po), while the upper storeys feature Vairocana and Sarvavid Vairocana in their respective centres (Sørensen 1994: 376–78). A comparable hierarchic stratification of spaces can perhaps be found at Nyarma.

The same sources also say that the future Buddha Maitreya was the main image at Khorchag (Vitali 1996: 259) while the Buddha of the Present, Śākyamuni, is represented at Tholing (*ibid.*: 258). Thus the three temples may have once been connected in terms of an overall spiritual programme featuring a triad consisting of the Past, the Present and the Future Buddha. This may have shaped a supra-regional sacred topography as earlier suggested by C. Jahoda and Tsering Gyalpo (verbal communication; see also Jahoda, “The foundation of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*, Ladakh”, this volume, pp. 286–287); however, the identification of underlying textual sources is necessary to define the religious-doctrinal context of such a configuration. Thus while the iconographic ensemble is unusual in this region, the idea of ensembles of temples defining a territorial order is a topos in Tibetan culture. Exemplary, as Sørensen and Hazod (2005) have shown, are the Border Taming Temples of the dynastic period, with Lhasa at their centre, as described in a Tibetan chronicle by Nel pa Paṇḍita (ca. 13<sup>th</sup> century; cf. also Uebach 1987). This constellation of temples is at the same time an emblem of the civilising of the untamed land, embodied as a demoness (Sørensen and Hazod 2005: fig. 94).<sup>43</sup>

While the throne at the western end of the main hall at Nyarma perhaps once accommodated a Dīpaṃkara (Mar me mdzad) image,<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to Eva Allinger for discussions on this topic.

In this context Yarlung *stūpas*, forming groups of “the three sacred *stūpa*-domes” (*bum gsum*), classified according to the *trikāya*, are also of interest. They represent iconographic ensembles defining a territorial order. They also represent complex multi-storey structures with internal shrines (cf. Sørensen and Hazod 2005: 103).

<sup>44</sup> The position corresponds to that of the Vajradhātu Vairocana, as the centre of the Vajradhātu *mahāmaṇḍala* in the zone between assembly hall and



the shrine chamber may have originally represented the highest spiritual level. As a consistent feature from the earliest phase in the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in Western Tibet religious orientation was dominated by religious traditions with the presence of Vairocana presiding over the programme as seen in the Tabo sanctum (in the early form as a meditating Vairocana)<sup>45</sup> and in the Nyag cave temple. As already mentioned, the spatial layout alluding to the shape of a *stūpa* with lateral niches projecting from the side walls of the ambulatory path provides this space with a cosmic dimension. Another consistent feature of the hierarchisation of the programme in this phase is the concept of three bodies of the Buddha—reflecting main ideals of Mahāyāna Buddhism—described by Schopen (1997: 258) as “each thought of in ever-increasing abstract terms; that finally, the real Buddha was thought to be ‘the Dharmakāya’ which has no flesh or blood or bones”. While the walls in the entrance hall or in the assembly hall may have been once adorned with images of the *nirmāṇakāya* (the “apparitional or emanational body”, the *saṃbhogakāya* may have been represented by the Buddha (Dīpaṃkara) and bodhisattvas in the main hall, while the *dharmakāya*, the “absolute body” of the Buddha, his teaching, and the highest sphere of wisdom is perhaps related to the sanctum, in which Vairocana may originally have dwelled, representing in a particular context the absolute nature of a Buddha (Luczanits 2004: 2).<sup>46</sup> Although this must remain a speculation, the symbol of the *dharmakāya* par excellence is the *stūpa*. The *stūpa*, and related spatial types, as a cosmological symbol of and substitute for the Buddha, is of course the architectural form par excellence to represent the *dharmakāya*.<sup>47</sup>

cella at Tabo. However, the latter is chronologically later than the foundation phase, when perhaps a Vairocana in the cella presided over the iconographic programme of the temple.

<sup>45</sup> In the Tabo cella are seated figures placed against the walls featuring an ancient form Vairocana (represented with hands held in meditation gesture) on a pedestal flanked by two bodhisattvas.

For a discussion of this iconographic theme: see Luczanits 2004: 38f. The author points out that the archaic type of Vairocana configuration was not in use later than the 11<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*: 42). A comparable configuration can be found in the apse at Ropa (*ibid.*: figs. 51, 52). This early form is derived from the Caryā Tantra literature (Luczanits 2004: 35) and contrasts to the Mahāvairocana or Vajradhātu Vairocana found in the central image of the assembly hall.

<sup>46</sup> At Tabo the representation of the Three Bodies are reflected both in a vertical hierarchy in the assembly hall (featuring different levels of spiritual development with the worldly realm in the lowest zone) as well as in a horizontal hierarchy leading the practitioner to ever higher spheres of perfection of wisdom a devotee can achieve, represented in the sanctum (cf. Luczanits 2010).

<sup>47</sup> It is of major interest if and at what stage of this evolutionary process the concepts of the *maṇḍala*—which were of course a dominant idea in Western Tibet from early on—also found their way into building forms and were

The evolutionary history of early Buddhist temples in Western Tibet is a complex process of transferring traditional building types from India, Kashmir and Central Tibet and their translation into a unique local idiom. The latter was constantly transformed under the influence of changing religious ideas, forms of worship, the context of donorship and artistic interactions. These processes need to be examined further from a multi-disciplinary approach in the future.<sup>48</sup>

materialised in architecture in Western Tibet. Different suggestions in this direction have been made by Kozicz (2007, 2009, 2010 a, b) and Feiglstorfer (2010, and “The architecture of the Buddhist temple complex of Nyarma”, this volume, pp. 225–257).

Linrothe (1996) tried to interpret the overall programme of the Alchi Sumtsek as a mandalic site. One cave temple in the Dungkar (Dung dkar) site, and the Great Alchi *stūpa* feature *maṇḍalas* realised as a three-dimensional configuration carved into the ceiling which alludes to such conception of space, but concentrated on the ceiling only.

<sup>48</sup> Concerning the overall spatial arrangement of the *gtsug lag khang* Kozicz (2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) analysed the iconometric patterns based on a proportional system superimposing the layout of the “Main Temple” (*gtsug lag khang*) and the ‘*Stūpa* Temple’ and a smaller structure (the two latter are of a later date). His formal studies on proportional relations led him to the assumption of an abstract “mandalic” design as the basis of the main temple’s layout. Kozicz’s models are based on earlier assumptions by Tucci (1988b [1935]) and Khosla (1975, 1979), who were among the first to pose the important questions of the underlying proportional systems, the symbolism of Western Himalayan temples and the question of architecture as materialisation of religious ideas. Rob Linrothe (1996, 1999) was the first to analyse the iconographic programme of the Alchi Sumtsek (Ladakh) assuming that the underlying conception is the cosmological topography of the *maṇḍala*.

With the help of a survey of the ground plans of different building complexes Kozicz (2007) was able to demonstrate a proportional system based on a grid of squares of equal size. On the basis of the latter he developed ideas concerning the symbolism of space. He proposed a vertical arrangement of spaces in the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*, which could simultaneously be perceived as a *maṇḍala* if one imagines the single spaces shifted along the main axis and superimposed shaping a single structure with the sanctum in the centre.

It is well-known that in Indian philosophy mathematics is regarded as an expression of the structure of the universe and a tool to shape a link between man and the universe. Accordingly, cosmological symbolism and proportionate systems play a crucial role in Tibetan temple architecture. Stella Kramrisch, an eminent scholar of Asian art (1887–1993), who studied art history at the University of Vienna, was a pioneer in the study of the form and meaning of Indian temple architecture. In her monumental work *The Hindu Temple* (1946), she defined the sources and basic concepts of Indian temple art. According to her mainly text-based analysis, all the architecture is a representation of the cosmos, and its principles are based on the same plan, the *Vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*, and proportionate measurements around which are gathered the multitudes of architectural themes. See also Michael Meister (1989) on Śāstric traditions in Indian arts their relation to actual practice based on plans and built structures.

Previous studies in the field of West Tibetan temple architecture to a certain extent lack the dimension of historicity of built forms and their symbolisms. Future studies on the meaning of the building forms need to combine formal studies with analyses of the internal programme. It is significant to note that none of the early West Tibetan temples’ interior decorations represent fully

### The Three Major Foundations in Context

In this preliminary summary, characteristic features with regard to the artistic remains of the ensembles of the three major foundations can be observed. At Khorchag two structures may stem from the earliest period (i.e. the founding phase in the 10<sup>th</sup> century or beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century). One of them, the lHa khang chen mo, has a Maitreya statue as a cultic centre—as mentioned in sources—while the sanctum of the Jo khang temple is occupied by the “Three Jobo Silver Brothers” (*jo bo dngul sku mched gsum*). However, the original program perhaps featured a monumental Avalokiteśvara. The Jo khang has a tripartite, longitudinal structure comparable to the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*, with a cultic centre at the south end with a niche and an entrance hall recalling that of Tabo. No sculptures from the earliest phase have so far been found, and until now the monumental wooden door frame of the lHa khang chen mo has been considered as the only remains from the early period. However, during field research in 2010, paintings from the earliest phase were re-discovered on the walls of the ambulatory in the Khorchag Jo khang as well as a niche projecting from the rear wall.<sup>49</sup> The newly discovered wall-paintings are not only the largest remains of paintings from the earliest phase of the West Tibetan kingdom, they also feature the first known *maṇḍala* configuration in a geometric shape in the period of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism in the region, featuring the Eight Bodhisattvas surrounding a central Buddha. Distinctive painting styles (of outstanding technical and artistic quality suggesting royal workshops) also appear to be indicative of this early group of temples. The ambulatory paintings under discussion represent a unique artistic tradition with strong Newari elements reminiscent of mid-11<sup>th</sup> century book-paintings from Nepal (Kalantari 2012a: 113). Small fragments of early paintings in the Gyatsa temple of Tholing,<sup>50</sup> which hitherto were thought to

developed *maṇḍalas* with iconographical fixed position of the deities in the *maṇḍala*, like the sKu 'bum of Gyantse (rGyal rtse).

<sup>49</sup> Furthermore art historical evidence suggests the existence of a niche in the present ambulatory of the Khorchag Jo khang, which was later filled with mud bricks. Thus we perhaps find comparable architectonic themes used for the royal foundations of Khorchag and Nyarma which differ from that in the contemporary Tabo *gtsug lag khang*, which, as already stated, has a simpler layout; However, the proportions of the niche at Khorchag are hard to define because walls have been added inside the *skor lam*. It is also not clear if the present sanctum at Khorchag is a later addition or a part of the original configuration. The reconstruction of the context of the structures of Khorchag is a task of future interdisciplinary research.

<sup>50</sup> Little of a larger ensemble at Tholing is preserved today: the Main Temple (*gtsug lag khang*), the White Temple (lHa khang dkar po), and the largely restored three-storey Serkhang (gSer khang). See for images and a short description of the remains Luczanits 1996: 76–77. The paintings in the Gyatsa (end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century) were regarded as the largest group of paintings and as the oldest

be the only early paintings extant from the West Tibetan kingdom, appear to show comparable stylistic features. However, the remains are too small to arrive at a final conclusion at this point. Certainly, both painting styles differ from contemporaneous paintings in the entrance hall at Tabo. The latter represent a different local stylistic idiom related to early Tibetan art in Central Tibet, which emerged in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and is first identifiable in the region in a stone stele at Purang (Jahoda and Papa-Kalantari 2009).<sup>51</sup>

We can thus find significant indications of shared characteristics and innovative features that appear to be distinctive of the major royal foundations. The fact that the constructions, paintings and woodcarvings at Nyarma, Khorchag, Tholing and Tabo were royal commissions indicates not only that some of the best available craftsmen in the realm were involved in their creation but that also new aspects of building forms adapted to the religious demands were being developed as well as complex combinations of complementing temple types and functions. In an attempt to define the context of the earliest temples at Nyarma, the tradition of royal foundations of outstanding Buddhist temples in Kashmir in particular, predating Nyarma, is perhaps relevant. The well-preserved portal at Khorchag<sup>52</sup> is particularly interesting for the artistic context of the tradition of *torāṇas* in this region. The magnificent door frame is closely related to the rich and lasting tradition of wooden temples in Himachal Pradesh. The Khorchag portal and its complex spatial layout clearly demonstrates the various contributions of the rich religious-cultural and “material” milieu of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir in the Trans-Himalayan regions near the Tibetan plateau, giving impetus to the development of independent and creative artistic traditions in the Western Himalayas from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>53</sup>

All the artistic media discussed in this short description of the three complexes reflect a high level of artistic and technical skill, monumentality, and an intense exchange with centres in north India,

preserved so far belonging to the original decoration of temples from the West Tibetan kingdom. Significant in the Gyatsa paintings is the wavy outline of the eyes, with high eyebrows and the characteristic shape of the mouth. Aureoles can also be seen on the walls of the Gyatsa at Tholing in addition.

<sup>51</sup> The spatial layout of the Tholing Gyatsa temple is unique, with a centralised layout and a central space around which are chapels facing in the four cardinal directions.

<sup>52</sup> Concerning the cultural-religious context of the woodcarvings, the portal's programme at Khorchag and the early paintings in the entrance hall at Tabo are characterized by the fusion of Hindu, non-Buddhist and Buddhist religious ideas.

<sup>53</sup> As wall-paintings do not play an important role in wooden temple art, it does not surprise that wall paintings at Khorchag just discussed show completely different stylistic characteristics and appear to derive from different artistic traditions and from different regions in Nepal.

Nepal and Kashmir. Perhaps one may imagine a situation of local monastic workshops with the continuous input of masters from the Indian plains, Nepal and Kashmir working together. These workshops under the guidance of Tibetan masterminds defining the spiritual programme and the spatial layout had the genius to integrate very diverse elements in an original way, thereby creating a distinctive, indigenous cultural-religious expression that contributed to the renaissance of Buddhism in the Western Himalayas.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In a short closing remark it should also be delineated that the significance of the—still impressive—site of Nyarma would make it urgently necessary that the temples be protected and preserved.

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