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Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari

## Guge Kingdom-Period Murals in the Zhag Grotto in mNga' ris, Western Tibet

A remarkable number of Buddhist temples, monasteries, cave sanctuaries and *stūpas* were founded in the political domain of the kings of Purang and Guge in Western Tibet (mNga' ris) from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. A specific type of sacred space that seems to have assumed a special role in this area is that of cave sanctuaries. The task of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to present new aspects of the religio-artistic context of the cave sanctuary of Zhag in Be ('Bye) valley, Tsamda (rTsa mda') County, Western Tibet (Ngari [mNga' ris] Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region). The cave lies about 8 km north of Dungkar (Dung dkar, etc.) and ca. 30 km north of the Sutlej river (Glang chen gtsang po)—in an area which was once part of Guge Byang ngos—and of Tholing monastery, the former religious centre of the old Guge kingdom.

The cave is at the northern head of the Be valley (in Tibetan 'bye means "open")—see Figs. 1-4. In the centre of this valley are ruins of a historic temple called Be *lha khang*, suggesting that a major

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a result of a documentation of West Tibetan cave temples carried out by the late Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po since the 1990s. A first discussion of specific aspects of the programme and function of the Zhag cave temple was presented by Tsering Gyalpo on the occasion of the 12<sup>th</sup> seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS), Vancouver 2010. Further analysis was carried out in collaboration with Christiane Kalantari and Christian Jahoda within the scope of the research projects P21806-G19 "Society, Power and Religion in Pre-Modern Western Tibet: Interaction, conflict and integration" and P20637-G15 "Oral and Festival Traditions", both directed by Christian Jahoda, at the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA), Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. The projects were financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

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religious centre may have existed in this region in former times. The relatively large number of caves (mainly in the south of the valley, mostly unpainted) also support this assumption. To the north-east of this temple (or monastery)—5 km away, across a plain—is the

1. Be ('Bye) valley, Tsamda County, Western Tibet (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).



2. Be ('Bye) valley, Tsamda County, Western Tibet (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).



3.–4. View of caves, Be valley (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

Zhag cave temple. Zhag is the name of this upper valley as well as of the cave. This name is still used by the local population and it is mentioned in a wall inscription.<sup>2</sup>

In general Ngari Prefecture is strewn with cave sanctuaries, of various sizes and quality of interior decoration, cut into the steep cliffs. Some of the caves have extensive internal decorations consisting of murals on the walls and ceilings—often combined with clay sculptures. Despite their historical significance, many of the caves in Tsamda County are still hardly known in the West. The earliest known (and one of the largest) examples of this type of religious space with an internal programme of the founding phase almost intact is the Nyag cave temple in Khartse valley, which is renowned as the ancestral village of the family of the Great Translator (*lo chen*) Rin chen bzang po (958–1055).<sup>3</sup> Other grottoes are already well-known for their visual and religious complexity and the artistic

virtuosity of their decorative programmes; for example, the three cave temples of Dungkar—situated in another nearby valley—which may have been founded by local aristocratic rulers. In particular the Dungkar paintings represent a high point of artistic and technical achievement in Western Tibet as already remarked by Giuseppe Tucci (1937: 174–75). The paintings in the Zhag cave temple in Be valley are closely related to this distinctive artistic tradition within early Western Himalayan art of the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

Among the first surveys of the Western Tibetan cave temples are expedition reports by Giuseppe Tucci (1988a [1935], 1988b [1936], 1937). Thomas Pritzker (1996) provided an introduction to various sites of Buddhist cave sanctuaries in this region accompanied by excellent photographic documentation. He also published narrative wall paintings in the Zhag cave, but without identifying them, while Helmut Neumann (2002) focused on an image of a *samsāracakra* (*srid pa'i 'khor lo*, “Wheel of Rebirths”) on the opposite side of the narrative in the entrance hall of the Zhag cave. The task of this paper is a preliminary survey of the overall composition, the identification of the narrative and its artistic and iconographic context and in particular the attempt to identify a specific class of “heroic” protector divinities and its iconographic content. The second part of this short essay looks at the possible religious-cultic function of this type of sacred space and its ritual use at present. A comparative study of the layouts, interior programmes and related ritual actions aims at

<sup>2</sup> The name for the cave used by Neumann (2002: 75, *passim*) is Pedongpo (Pad [ma'i] sdong po, “the stalk of the lotus”), who dates the paintings in the cave to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> or to the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*: 82–83), while in Pritzker (1996: 26, *passim*) it is called Dumbu (perhaps a rendering of the Tibetan sDong po).

<sup>3</sup> The first scholarly publications on Khartse valley were by David Pritzker (2000) and Thomas J. Pritzker (2008). A study by Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari in collaboration with Christian Jahoda (2009) provides a preliminary survey of the different caves and monuments of that site. The as yet little-studied cave's wall paintings feature unique stylistic trends and iconographic themes dating from ca. the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, with a strong relation to Indic traditions with regard to style and iconography. A more comprehensive study of the sacred landscape of Khartse valley and its historic context is in preparation.

<sup>4</sup> Luczanits proposes a 12<sup>th</sup>-century dating based on stylistic (2004: 116–118) as well as on iconographic basis (*ibid.*: 223).

classifying different concepts and methods of creating hierarchies and of stratifying sacred space, providing a potential insight into how these spaces were conceived.

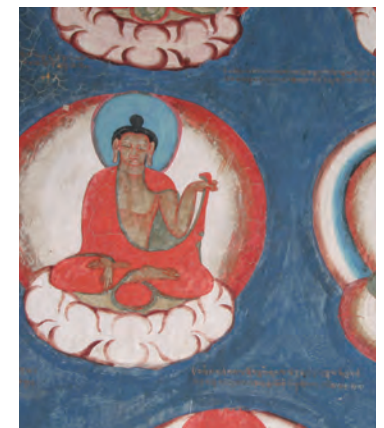
#### General Description and Remarks on the State of Preservation

The topographic position of the Zhag cave is remarkable. Carved into the east-facing hills of the valley, it is situated at an altitude of ca. 3,870 m. The entrance door, which can be reached via a pathway, faces south and opens into a vaulted corridor (Fig. 5). The latter functions as an entrance hall (*sgo khang*) featuring a distinctive iconographic ensemble. The central space or main hall of this comparably small sanctuary is roughly square, with the east-west walls and the north-south walls about 3.4 metres long with a ceiling around 6 metres high. It has a simple earth floor, at the centre of which are the remains of a *stūpa*. The walls of the central space, the ceilings and the side walls of the corridor are adorned with (original) paintings from the early phase of Buddhism in Western Tibet.

The iconographic programme of the main hall features paintings of the popular religious theme of the Thousand Buddhas (*sangs rgyas stong sku*) of the Bhadrakalpa (present auspicious age or Fortunate Aeon that has one thousand Buddhas), which completely cover the four walls and surround the *stūpa* at the centre of the temple (Fig. 6). The lowest areas of the four walls are decorated with a frieze of lotus vine ornament or undulating rhizomes growing out of a central lotus stem, thus binding the overall compositions together. The lower sections of the corners of the slightly sloping walls of this space are filled with characteristic standing or walking Buddhas—which are also characteristic distinctive features at Dungkar—vertically connected by lotus pediments.

The murals are executed using costly, luminous pigments and minerals (Fig. 7).<sup>5</sup> The figures in the main hall are painted on a bright, sky-blue background typical of the mural style of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The colour scheme appears further dominated by red, white and black. While the paintings in the main hall are applied in thick layers the images in the entrance hall have more sober colours and motifs that are partly incomplete, leaving the reddish outlines and lines (perhaps drawn with a string) separating individual pictorial sections visible. It is probable that most elements of the composition were similarly delineated. On other sections the upper layer of paint

<sup>5</sup> According to local tradition, semi-precious stones such as corals, turquoises, pearls and different kinds of gemstone of special significance in the Tibetan cultural sphere were applied indicating perhaps a specific (blessing) power associated with these materials. Also the frequent use of gold from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards indicates that the most precious materials were used as effective attributes of divine imagery.



5. Zhag cave: view into the vaulted corridor (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

6. Main hall: central *stūpa* (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

7. Detail, Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

has obviously been lost. Unfortunately, the lower parts of the walls have suffered from colour fade or paint loss.

#### Vestibule

The paintings in the southern part of the cave, i.e. the vestibule or entrance corridor (*sgo khyams*), can typologically be compared with those in the entrance hall (*sgo khang*) of Western Himalayan temples, an important example being the *sgo khang* in the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* (ca. 1000). They feature on each side iconographic sets organised in a vertical hierarchy; the themes are arranged in mirror-like symmetry to each other. Related to the worldly realm is a *jātaka*, depicted on the lower right (east) side, while an image of a *saṃsāracakra* (*srid pa'i 'khor lo*, Wheel of Rebirths) is shown on the



8. Entrance corridor, west wall, *saṃsāracakra* (*srid pa'i khor lo*, Wheel of Rebirths) (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

9. Depiction of protectors above *saṃsāracakra* (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

10. *Saṃsāracakra*: detail of the upper middle section (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

11. Mahākāla and royal ram-rider (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

lower left (west) side (Fig. 8, Fig. 10). When entering the sacred site the practitioner first contemplates these didactic themes designed to lead him to the teaching of the Buddha and to escape the cycle of rebirths. Directly above the upper section of the *saṃsāracakra* are the donors, accompanied by inscriptions, while different classes of protectors who guard the threshold to the temple are shown on the uppermost level of both sides, in the transition zone between wall paintings and ceiling decorations representing textiles.

The *saṃsāracakra* represents one of the core concepts of Buddhist thought taught by the Buddha. The example at Zhag features six realms into which humans can be reborn, placed in sections of a wheel: the world of gods is placed in the uppermost, central, and thus most prestigious position. To the right is the world of *asuras* and to the left the world of human beings. The latter are all clad in West Tibetan robes of the local aristocratic elite. Some figures in this realm are shown performing various activities, some are in fighting poses armed with shields and swords typical of the region. In the bottom zone are lower, unfavourable realms into which a human can be reborn (see Neumann 2002 for a detailed description).

The position of the *saṃsāracakra* in the corridor conforms to the prescription in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* given by the Buddha. It can be compared with the representation of the same theme in the *sgo khang* of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* executed at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (see also Kalantari, "Hārītī and Pāñcika at Tabo", this volume, pp. 303–304).

Above the *saṃsāracakra* is a depiction of donors engaged in a ritual, plus an inscription placed in a separate red text cartouche, which will be discussed in detail below (Fig. 8, Fig. 14). Directly to the left of the donors is a deity whose upper body is fused with a lotus pedestal and who holds a vase, who can be identified as the Earth Goddess (*sa'i lha mo*) Bhūdevī (Gudrun Melzer, verbal communication, February 2012) as discussed later. On top of this frieze are images of local protectors. In the uppermost section, between ornamental strips simulating lengths of textiles and a row of hybrid creatures and a male rider, is a triangular blue space in which fragments of a larger deity are visible. The figure is grey with black outlines, corpulent, seated on a human corpse in *lalitāsana*, with the left leg hanging, holding a curved knife in his raised right hand. His



head is adorned with a diadem of skulls. The sum of characteristics suggests an attribution as a two-armed Mahākāla with the attributes of the knife and skull bowl. The apotropaic function and position of Mahākāla as well as local protectors is usually above the portal, which in the vaulted entrance hall of the Zhag cave temple corresponds to the uppermost zone of its figure depictions.

The figure below Mahākāla appears to be a significant element of the religious-political landscape in the Western Himalayas but it is still little discussed and understood (Fig. 11). The depiction features a male divinity riding on a ram, accompanied by remarkable images of hybrid creatures with fearsome weapons, i.e. humans with heads of elephants, bears (?), a gazelle or antelope and perhaps a goat, in fighting poses, all adorned with red ribbons (Fig. 12).<sup>6</sup> The mythic creatures are whirling shields and swords as if performing a martial dance. An identical group of four mythical animals and a ram-rider can also be found in two temples in Dungkar (Fig. 13), thus most likely representing an iconographic set.<sup>7</sup> The mounted figure/ram-rider in the Zhag cave appears to be the leader of this group. He is attired in the lavish garb of a local nobleman, wearing a precious robe and characteristic overlong-sleeves (under which a whip is visible). He is further adorned with a broad-brimmed hat and a hairdo consisting

<sup>6</sup> Animal-headed beings (birds and dogs) are in the retinue of a Mahākāla from Central Tibet (now in the Rubin Museum, New York) from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Linrothe 2004: 53).

<sup>7</sup> Above the portal of this cave there is also Rematī, a local female protectress with her retinue. She can also be associated with the rise of Mahākāla in Western Tibet, perhaps integrating older indigenous spirits.



12. Hybrid creatures as followers of ram-rider (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

13. Dungkar, Cave 2: Protectors above the portal, featuring royal rider flanking Mahākāla (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

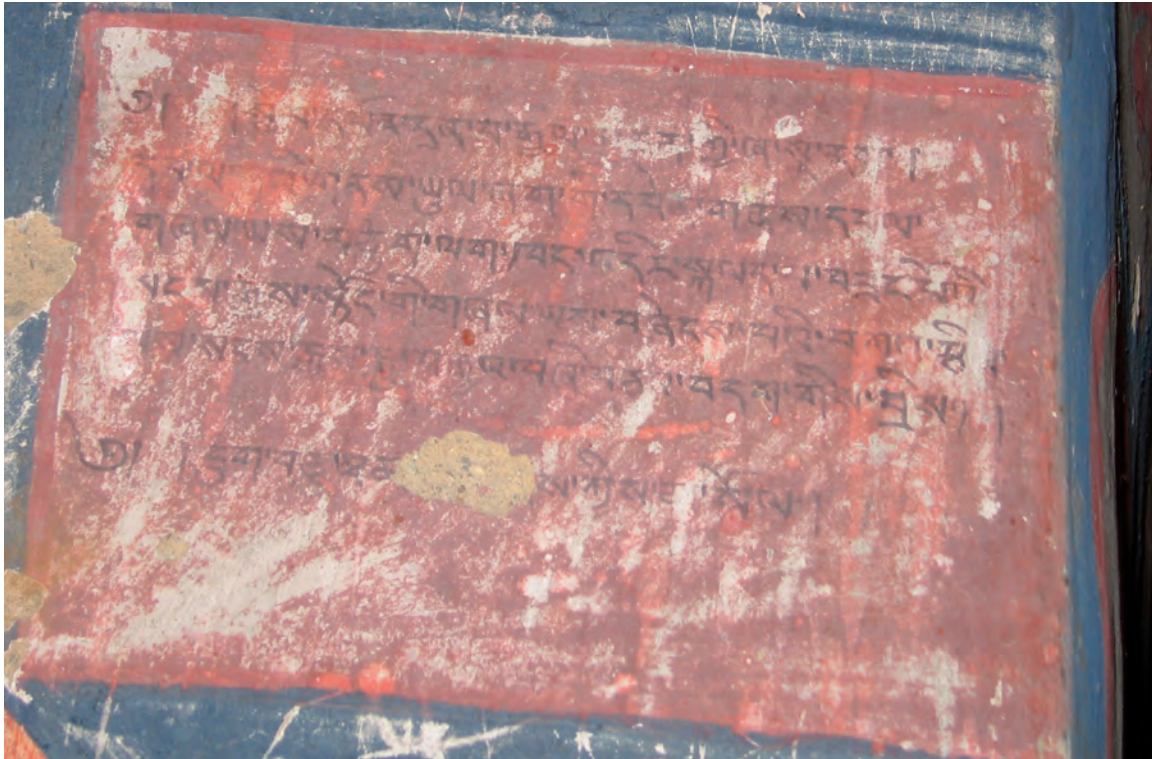
of two long braids studded with turquoises hanging down in front, while the proper hairdo consists of half-length hair.<sup>8</sup> The weapons are precisely executed: a tiger-skin quiver and a bow are placed on either sides, suggesting the figure is a hunter and/or warrior. In his hand he holds reins that end in a small weapon, a *vajra* (*rdo rje*), clearly identifying him as a protector deity.

A comparable configuration of Mahākāla and a local mounted god can be found nearby at Dungkar (Fig. 13). This type of mounted male protector appears to have become popular from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards with the rise of Mahākāla. The assumption that Mahākāla and mounted warriors may represent an iconographic whole is even more evident in an image of a male divinity on horseback accompanied by a shield-bearer, depicted as an attendant of Mahākāla, in the Alchi 'Du khang (Ladakh); (Fig. 33, cf. Papa-Kalantari 2010).<sup>9</sup> He is positioned in the right corner and is depicted as an armed horseman in the garb of a local prince or aristocratic ruler, holding a lance (*mdung*) and accompanied by a shield-bearer below.<sup>10</sup> Both at Alchi and Zhag one or a group of birds are depicted

<sup>8</sup> According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 11, Pe har wears a broad-brimmed hat called a *sag zhu*, perhaps related to a black silk hat worn by the divinities of the *rgyal po* class.

<sup>9</sup> Further examples of male protectors on horseback are depicted in the Alchi Sumtsek, as well as in the little-studied small sanctuary of Saspotse in Ladakh (above the portal). We wish to thank Gudrun Melzer who made us aware of this relation at Alchi.

<sup>10</sup> There Mahākāla—holding the typical hooked knife in his raised right arm and trampling on a prone corpse—is depicted in a setting of a cremation ground with different attendants, animals and female spirits (cf. Papa-Kalantari



14. Text cartouche with historical inscription placed near the donor depiction, entrance corridor (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

15. Zhag cave, entrance corridor: wall painting of the temple's founders (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

nearby (in addition a dog or jackal at Zhag) perhaps alluding to the burial ground associated with Mahākāla. The historical context of the appearance of this class of protectors is likely a socio-political situation marked by the importance of martial guardian deities. As an innovative notion in this period they appear to reflect the warrior-like ethos of the ruling elite, which is also a dominant feature in donor representations and in relevant texts. Their iconographic function may be as protectors of trade routes and as defenders of the border regions of the political domain. Their cult is perhaps reflected in contemporary religious performances up to the present day (cf. Appendix).

The temple's founders are depicted in the register below in close relation to the local territorial gods (Fig. 15). Of historical significance is of course the inscription on the same wall set in a text cartouche. This is placed near the *saṃsāracakra*, but it is related to the donor images on the same wall (Fig. 14). The text states:

In the presence of the teacher (*slob dpon, ācarya*) Dran pa rgyal

2010: fig. 3). One of the female spirits is perhaps dPal ldan lha mo (or Rematī). Jackals, black dogs, crows and vultures represent the animals of the cemetery ground which are considered messengers of the protector.



mtshan were painted by me [the painter] in this magnificent immeasurable *gtsug lag khang* of the hermitage in the glorious sacred place of Zhag 940 Buddhas instead of the prescribed immeasurable one thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon (Bhadrakalpa).

[?] 60 were not effected.

(Translation: Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, Christian Jahoda)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup>[l. 1] @ / ː / slob . dpon . dran . pa . rgyal . mtshan . gyi . zha . snga . nas . / [l. 2] dpal . zhu'i . gnas . yul . zhag . gi . dben . gnas . dpal . [l. 3] gzhal . yas . gtsug . lag . khang . 'dir . skald . pa . bzang . po'i . [l. 4] sangs . rgyas . stong . gi . gzhal . yas . bzhengs . pa'i . bka' . rtsis<sup>13</sup> . [l. 5] las . sangs . rgyas . rgu<sup>14</sup> . brgya' . bzhi . bcu . bdag . gis . bris . / /

[l. 6] @ / ː / drug . bcu . tham [a few syllables are no longer extant] s . kyis . ma<sup>15</sup> . sol . / /

(Transliteration: Tsering Gyalpo, Christian Jahoda)

The donor group is headed by a male figure in local long-sleeved coat combined with a monk's robe holding a *mālā* in his hand.<sup>16</sup> Due

<sup>11</sup> According to Neumann (2002: 81–82), in the inscription “the artist calls it [the cave]: a *gtsug lag khang* for the 1000 Buddhas of the Fortunate Era”.

<sup>12</sup> Editorial signs: @ = *yig mgo*; \_ = uncertain reading.

<sup>13</sup> Or *rtsi kyi*?

<sup>14</sup> Read *rgu* for *dgu*; or *rgya*?

<sup>15</sup> Or *cha*?

<sup>16</sup> Another strategy for the construction of legitimation, charisma and continuity appears to be the embedding of the royal elite into a Buddhist cosmogonic vision. The combination of donors and cosmological imagery is also present

to its close proximity to the local protectors, the image appears to commemorate perhaps not only the consecration of the temple—making sacred space effective as manifestations of divinities—but may also be related to rituals in which the deities are “invited” (cf. Jahoda 2011: 29) to the temple and which serve to secure the benevolence and protection of the temple and the territory, as is still tradition for example at Khorchag monastery today.<sup>17</sup>

The earth goddess depicted to the left of the donor, and a group of snake gods symmetrically arranged on the opposite side are significant for the interpretation of the scene. As described in the *Kriyāsamgraha*,<sup>18</sup> a compendium of ritual texts from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (however the rituals may draw upon much earlier tradition), *nāgas* and earth gods are appeased in a ritual before generating the *maṇḍala* ground:

“The teacher executes the three concentrations (*samādhitrāya*) at the centre of the purified ground, and offers a mentally produced act of worship (*manomayīpujā*) to the resident gods (*deva*), the protectors of the cardinal directions (*dikpāla*), the *nāgas*, the earth goddess Vasudhā, and the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. He presents them with the water for the face and other items of worship, [...] and transforms the ground into emptiness. Then [...] he envisages it as having the nature of *vajra*-particles [...]. After

in the self-representation of the ruling elite at Tabo. As explained by Davidson, “the valorization of political and social stratification in the affirmation of extant Tibetan society and the rule of its leaders was incorporated in the cosmogonic narrative”, “most relying on that of the early Buddhist schools, especially as adopted in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda*'s story of the origin of kingship and the lineage of Śākyamuni's clan.” (Davidson 2003: 65). “[In] the *sūtra* and *Vinaya* texts the kingly cosmogony becomes embedded in the narrative life of the Buddha. In these latter instances, the frame story of the kingly cosmogony operates as an extension of Śākyamuni's hagiography” (*ibid.*: 72; cf. Panglung 1981: 84 for the relevant passage in the *Vinaya*). The programme also reflects the relationship of the imperial line and the cosmos in the sense of an “invocation of Buddhist cosmology organized around the three bodies of the Buddha”, as Davidson (2003: 80) has put it. The *jātaka* stories or other narratives with the local elite as ‘actors’ is another feature of this system. This also demonstrates the importance of uninterrupted continuity as a means of legitimisation of the authority of a tradition which is also the basis for the concept of lineages of teachers up to present. The notion of a cosmologically founded basis of power and legitimisation is found in contemporaneous rituals in various regions of historical Western Tibet (see Jahoda 2011). Tibetan kings were regarded as being descended from the Buddha himself through the bodhisattvas' various incarnations. Certain texts, such as *bka' 'chems ka khol ma* attributed to Atiśa (11<sup>th</sup> century), propose “a direct lineal descent of Srong-btsan sgam-po from the Buddha's own previous incarnation” (Davidson 2003: 75).

<sup>17</sup> The Namthong festival is celebrated every year to commemorate and renew the invitation and the instalment of the local territorial deity.

<sup>18</sup> According to Melzer the text represents the oldest source mentioning the *Vairocana-sūtra*—verbal communication, February, 2012.



that, he envisages and summons the knowledge Pṛthivī holding a golden vase (*kalaśa*), offers her worship, makes request to build a *vihāra*, and then envisages her dissolving into the ground.” (Skorupski 2002: 60).

The position of the earth goddess close to the portal, the transition zone between the outside (profane, or earth) and inside of the sacred space is also significant.

The *nāgas* are represented on the same level on the opposite side (Fig. 16). These are also depicted prominently in the Nyag cave temple at Khartse (cf. Tshe ring rgyal po and Papa-Kalantari 2009; fig. 18) featuring eight snake spirits above the portal. In addition, the earth goddess occupies a prominent position in both temples: at Khartse she is placed above a group of *dikpālas* depicted in the lowest level, on the right of the portal and near to the large assembly scene on the side-wall. This position in the transition zone between the mundane and sacred world may allude to her function as guardian of the *bodhimaṇḍa* (the place of enlightenment of the Buddha) and the throne on which the whole temple rests.

The following request is recited during the ritual of propitiation of the earth goddess: “O goddess, surrender to the superior paths of practice and conduct (*caryānaya*), the spiritual stages (*bhūmi*)

16. Entrance corridor, north wall, depiction of *nāgas* above the *jātaka* narrative (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

17. View on the east wall of the entrance corridor, featuring *jātaka* and protectors above (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).



and the perfections (*pāramitā*) of all the protecting Buddhas. Just as the protector Śākyasiṃha has overcome the host of Māra, so will I destroy the host of demons and construct a *vihāra* and other buildings." (Skorupski 2002: 29).

At Zhag, each of the *nāgas* is seated on a lotus pedestal, shown in vivid movements alluding to water as their dwelling place and holding a branch of leaves representing lotus rhizomes.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Their realm is the lakes and thus their function is close to that of the earth goddess. The ritual in the *Kriyāsamgraha* describes the pacification of the *nāgas* before the construction of the temple also mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Cf. also Sørensen and Hazod (2005: 58) for a text (*Khra 'brug gnas bshad*) on the rituals of pacification of the *klu* before the foundation of Khra 'brug, Tibet's first Buddhist temple. The prominent position of the eight *klu* recalls a space in this

The iconographic ensemble in the entrance hall/corridor featuring donor images engaged in rituals combined with the Wheel of Rebirths and protectors can also be found in the *sgo khang* of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang*. This thematic set is in line with the *Vinaya*, prescribing the decoration of the entrance hall of a *vihāra*-type temple (see Kalantari, "Hārītī and Pāñcika at Tabo", this volume, pp. 303ff.). In the text the Buddha himself is alleged to have ordered that the *samsāracakra* should be painted in the vestibule of every monastery so that the devotee can be reminded of all possible forms of existence (cf. *ibid.*). As is also the case at Tabo, in the entrance hall donors are shown in rituals of consecration as well as in specific forms of worship, while Indic and local protectors depicted above guard the transition zone from the entrance hall to the sacred space of the assembly hall and shrine.

The corridor's right (north) wall is dominated by a narrative composition, namely a *jātaka* (Fig. 17). While narratives at Tabo are depicted in a processional direction along the lowest zones in the *'du khang* and ambulatory (*skor lam*), here they are shown in a vertical panel in the entrance hall. As already mentioned, eight seated *nāgas* (*klu*) are depicted above in two registers, representing the subterranean snake spirits converted as "lower" protectors of the Buddha and the temple.<sup>20</sup> In a segment above a dancing spirit is shown holding a garland as an offering. Stripes with textile patterns are depicted in the curved ceiling above.

The *jātaka* composition in the lower section of this wall has not yet been accounted for, nor has the narrative been identified as yet. The painting features Avalokiteśvara in the upper left corner presiding over a composition of narrative scenes (Fig. 18). Avalokiteśvara is depicted as a white seated figure in *lalitāsana* (royal ease) on a lotus throne framed by a halo emitting light.<sup>21</sup> He has six arms and the image of a Buddha Amitābha is depicted in his hair-knot. Two of the six hands are in *varada* and *abhaya* poses (combined with a jewel), holding a lotus, a water-pot, a staff with three horns (*tridaṇḍa*; in the upper hand) and a rosary (hardly visible), identifying him as Sugatisandarśana Lokeśvara. This iconographic type was very popular and is also found at Dungkar,

temple called *klu khang*, close to the mGon po *lha khang* (see Sørensen and Hazod 2005: plan by Reinhard Herdick on p. 327).

Vases flanked by *nāgas* in the bottom zone as the source of the *maṇḍala* at Sumda may allude to the same theme and related rituals (cf. Luczanits 2004: figs. 276 and 276 for this theme at Nako).

<sup>20</sup> These spirits of Indian mythology are similar to the Tibetan *klu*, which "dwell primarily in different types of water, springs, rivers, lakes and wells [...]. They guard the palaces and treasures of deities, control the weather.." (Kélenyi 2003: 13).

<sup>21</sup> The description of the six-armed form can be found in the *Sādhnamālā* (Bhattacharyya 1987: 141).



where Avalokiteśvara is in a *maṇḍala* on the entrance wall (cf. also Pritzker 1996: fig. 16).<sup>22</sup> Two standing local males adorned with large circular hats and a kneeling figure, a devotee, which appears to be being blessed by Avalokiteśvara, are at his side (with a text cartouche to their right) and at his feet (Fig. 18). Unfortunately the text is only fragmentary. In general, the depiction of popular tutelary deities in close proximity to images of donors—securing their personal salvation and protection—is a constant feature in the art of this region.<sup>23</sup> However, their integration in a narrative is a new element. The combination with a *jātaka* perhaps emphasises the aspect of Sugatisandarśana Lokeśvara as the one who shows the various favourable ways of life which lead to liberation, as suggested by Melzer (personal communication, May 2013), based on the name signifying “the one who shows the favourable/good forms of existence.”

The *jātaka* can be identified as the popular *jātaka* of the starving tigress, the *Vyāghrī-* or *Mahāsattvajātaka*—the story of self-sacrifice in previous births of the Buddha as described in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra* (Fig. 19).<sup>24</sup>

The famous *jātaka* of the starving tigress is also depicted at Alchi (on the *dhotī* of Maitreya in the Sumtsek) and at Mangyu (Linrothe 2010: 125ff. and Linrothe 2011). There the narrative is represented on the loincloth of a monumental bodhisattva image in clay.<sup>25</sup> While at Alchi and Mangyu a restricted number of isolated key scenes are arranged in an ornamental grid of lozenges adapted from textile surface patterns, in the narrative at Zhag various scenes are placed in a unified setting that covers a vertical panel of the side wall in the entrance hall. Exemplary of the popularity and importance of Buddhist (educative, moral/edifying) stories in early Western Himalayan Buddhist art are images in the Tabo 'du *khang* (assembly hall) and ambulatory (ca. mid 11<sup>th</sup> century), featuring wall



18. *Jātaka* painting: detail of Avalokiteśvara in the upper left corner. Local devotees paying homage to Avalokiteśvara (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

paintings of complete narrative cycles. Those in the assembly hall are complemented with cartouches containing texts. These inscriptions are designed and arranged to represent the whole story—“the sūtra itself” (Steinkellner 1999: 250)—and do not just represent excerpts from the texts or aids for oral presentations (*ibid.*: 249f.). With regard to the compositional type of imagery, the Sudhana frieze at Tabo, for example, features a continuous chronological narrative arranged in a horizontal band in the lowest section of the east, south and west walls, with the main character being shown in various successive phases of the action. The individual scenes are often expressed in depictions of buildings, where the encounters of the hero—Sudhana—and his teachers or *kalyāṇamītras* take place. The story runs from the entrance wall to the sanctum, so the devotee can follow the progress of the story in a chronological way when circumambulating the main hall. Thus this mode also reflects the ritual use of the temple and the direction of the ambulation. The ensemble of different narratives in the temple complements the spiritual progress represented in the overall iconographic programme in the different parts of the temple.

In the Zhag cave the tigress story mainly follows the popular *Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra*<sup>26</sup> but in contrast to Tabo the story (representing a different legend, the story of Sudhana) does not

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also Kashmir-style bronzes in US collections and in Srinagar (Pal 1975: figs. 50–52).

<sup>23</sup> Avalokiteśvara is not only a saviour from hardship and bestower of peace but also regarded as guide of souls to the halls of paradise, thus watching over human destiny. Precious silk banners with his image were frequently donated to temples at Dunhuang to worship Avalokiteśvara with the aim of ensuring his benevolence and his assistance in the desire for a favourable rebirth. A silk banner from Dunhuang (holding a triple banderole mounted on a hook) documents that this idea was well established at Dunhuang by the 9<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Whitfield and Farrer 1990: pl. 15).

<sup>24</sup> The theme is also shown in Khartse (Kalantari, in preparation) and must have been popular in India as well, where no wall paintings of this theme have survived. However, the story is frequently depicted in Pāla-style manuscripts.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, at Mangyu the deity lives in a tower that functions as a threshold to the temple, resembling towers described in the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* as first described by Linrothe (2010: 125) and Luczanits (2010).

<sup>26</sup> A detailed reading will be provided in an article by G. Melzer (forthcoming).

19. *Jātaka* of the starving tigress (Vyāghrī- or Mahāsattvajātaka), upper half of the narrative panel (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).



unfold as a continuous linear frieze. Zhag shows a singular narrative type not found in previous phases of this artistic-religious tradition, namely a spatial organisation of themes with episodes from different chronological phases of the story shown in a unified spatial setting creating a three-dimensional space.

The type of landscape setting for a narrative painting is also a new element in the Zhag cave. The composition shows a close frontal view of landscape elements such as trees, combined with a view from the distance.

The story begins with a group of three princes shown at the centre, with Prince Mahāsattva in their midst. They are in the forest, which reaches up to the top of the composition; to their right is the self-sacrifice of the prince—in compassion for the hungry tigress who is too weak to feed her cubs. The *stūpa* with his relics is depicted below. To the left lower side is a single-chamber house with a pointed roof in which the queen dreams of bad omens as signs of her son's death, while below is depicted the palace with the king and queen discussing sorrowfully the dream.

The style is reminiscent of paintings on this theme at Dunhuang: in Cave 254 (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century) the scenes are also arranged vertically, situated between two niches on the side wall featuring the three bodhisattvas at the centre and the sacrifice on the right (cf. Whitfield 1996 I: 19; for a survey of the versions of this story and comparative study of representations see Schlingloff 2000: 161–64).

Three main settings can be identified in this composition: 1) The forest in the centre and top zone, with the main event, the beholding of the hungry tigress by Mahāsattva (Sems can chen po) and the two other princes (Mahādeva and Mahāpanada) in the centre. 2) In the right-hand third of the panel is the self-sacrifice and below is the place with the remains of the body, i.e. the bones, after Mahāsattva has been eaten by the tigress. The spot was immediately transformed into a place of pilgrimage as is also indicated by the *stūpa* in the lower right-hand corner. 3) On the lower left-hand side is the tower, representing the royal court (also providing an opportunity to depict the local Tibetan architectural environment of the ruling families). In a small building with a pitched roof the queen had a baleful dream,

while in the tower below she is talking to the king about the dream and receiving the message of the course of the events.

Another characteristic feature of the narrative structure is the fact that actions from different chronological phases of the story take place in each of these three settings. Each of these sub-settings or isles are episodes of different phases of the story that happen here. For example, the forest setting in the centre and top section of the image includes the first scene with the three bodhisattvas, the sacrifice, the discussion between the princes, and the servants looking for Mahāsattva: the sequence of these events starts at the centre and then the story runs in a clockwise direction to the top of the image with the servants. Thus the story is only readable for onlookers familiar with the content. Each scene is not separated into individual spaces, forming a band running in a frieze from left to right as at Tabo, but the artist achieves an aesthetically pleasing composition of the area as a whole (cf. Schlingloff 1988: 237). The settings are arranged in such a way that they can be read as a unified composition featuring an overall landscape composition.<sup>27</sup> The creation of a three-dimensional pictorial space is a completely new achievement compared to the previous Indo-Tibetan schools of Spiti and Upper Kinnaur (10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries). In the latter, compositions of neutral screens for planar symmetrical arrangements of motifs dominate.

At Khartse neither the continuous action of the story nor a detailed representation of various events in a “landscape” can be found; here the story is reduced to the most significant elements, with the jungle forest as the setting.

Concerning the inscriptions at Zhag, text cartouches typical of narrative imagery in this region, in red are left empty. However, as a unique feature, short texts are inserted in direct relation to the figures (Fig. 19); their purpose appears to be primarily to emphasise the action or emotion shown in the respective scene. Thus the close relation of text and images in the Zhag cave temple serves to facilitate the reading of the images for the devotees, which is a feature hitherto unknown from all the temples in previous periods in this region.

The depiction at Zhag is also unique for the precise and detailed portrait of nature and material culture: the different episodes of the

*jātaka* story are shown in a landscape setting featuring a tranquil forest above and a palace in the lower left section; parrots, peacocks and monkeys are shown in the trees, alluding to an Indian landscape setting. This interest in nature and trees in particular gives these scenes a flavour of vividness and individuality.<sup>28</sup> The architectural and sartorial conventions reflect local Western Tibetan culture. For example, dwellings on the left feature a house with carved wooden pillars and a pointed roof, perhaps covered with blue tiles. Such roof types may have been common architectural forms, as can also be concluded from historic examples of this type of temple in Nako (Upper Kinnaur).<sup>29</sup> The scene inside this house displays further interesting local features, showing the queen on her bed with a characteristic wooden head bolster. She wears the typical long white upper garment (with lapels?) and a round hat. Together with specific shoes, the accoutrements appear to represent examples of historic costumes that still exist in mNga' ris today.<sup>30</sup> Below this single-chamber building is an interesting tower-like, multi-storey structure, perhaps representing a castle or fort, on the top storey of which the couple discusses the omen. The dwelling recalls historic all-corbelled forts (cf. Devers, “An archaeological account of Nyarma and its surroundings, Ladakh”, this volume pp. 214–216) who provides a documentation and drawings of this type of architecture at Nyarma).

In general, narrative scenes featuring *jātaka* stories—and the life of the Buddha in particular—are a characteristic genre in the decorative

<sup>28</sup> The tree above the dead corpse has a specific shape and colour and is described in the texts as bamboo. However, a specific symbolism may be associated with the trees: while most of them have red twigs with strong green leaves, the colour of the tree above the dead prince is different, it is white and there are no animals on it. Its branches hang down, as if in mourning and alluding to the death and the sorrow. Such elements recall Newari as well as Chinese conventions of landscape painting, but systematic studies of this genre in Tibetan painting are needed to arrive at a secure basis for any hypothesis. The tree appears to respond to human emotions and reflect the unbearable pain of the self-sacrifice. Trees also appear to enforce the emotions of the people depicted at Alchi (Sumtsek, upper storey); there fields of the Five Tathāgatas feature trees in full bloom and bowed almost as if venerating and celebrating the presence of the Buddhas.

This phenomenon has a parallel in Chinese nature symbolism (cf. Chinese landscape settings during the Western Wei I and the philosophical background (neo-Taoist) of the correspondence between man and nature (Chen 1995: 254), and the metaphorical language of nature to characterise man's personalities.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Nako, Padmasambhava *lha khang*, where 14<sup>th</sup> century ceiling planks covering a pointed roof can be identified (Papa-Kalantari 2002).

<sup>30</sup> The blue colour of the roof suggests the use of glazed tiles. Comparable roof decorations can be found in the depictions of heavenly palaces on the main wall of the IHa khang gong ma at Nako, Upper Kinnaur (cf. Allinger and Kalantari 2012). A pointed roof with original ceiling decorations stored in the Nako temple can be viewed in the Padmasambhava *lha khang* of Nako village, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>27</sup> A completely different form of surface composition is shown at Mangyu and Sumda (ca. beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> century; cf. Linrothe 2010 and 2011), where single (key) sequences of the story are inserted into an ornamental pattern of lozenges depicted on the *dhoti* of monumental bodhisattva statues—a mode that I categorised as medallion style (Papa-Kalantari 2000 and 2002). This type is perhaps derived from Central Asian ceiling compositions featuring medallions as frames for episodes of Buddhist stories.



20.–24. Main hall, theme of the Thousand Buddhas as recounted in the *Bhadrakalpikasūtra* (*sKal pa bzang po'i mdo*) (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

programmes of early West Tibetan temples in various media (e.g. in wall paintings, wood carvings on portals). In contrast, in life stories of the Buddha from India and Nepal of that period, depictions of events related to specific sacred spaces are popular; examples can be found in manuscripts<sup>31</sup> but complete continuous narratives are less frequent. The donors and designers of such programmes clearly aimed at promoting the (new) Buddhist life ideal in the region. In particular, *jātakas* serve as models of virtuous behaviour of every human in the form of previous births of the Buddha.

### The Main Hall

As observed by Neumann, the theme of the Thousand Buddhas in the main hall is recounted in the *Bhadrakalpikasūtra* (*sKal pa bzang po'i mdo*) (Figs. 20–24). He remarks that there are actually 787 Buddhas (Neumann 2002: 81).<sup>32</sup>

The depiction of the Thousand Buddhas blessing the present

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the Newari *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript (Cambridge University Library, AsP Add. 1643), 11<sup>th</sup> century, dated 1015, deities images labelled with topographical names, thus specific images of pilgrimage places in Buddhist Asia, among which are some of Nepal.

<sup>32</sup> According to Neumann (2002: 81) the number in the *maṇḍala* ceiling cave in Dungkar is 996, however there they do not show Buddhas.

aeon of the Bhadrakalpa is known in India—such as Ajanta—from very early on.<sup>33</sup> The *sūtra* was translated into Tibetan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Khri Srong lde btsan (755–ca. 800) (Chandra 1996: 4; Dotson 2010: 228).

The first known example of this theme in the Western Himalayas can be found in the ambulatory of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* (Figs. 25–26). At Tabo, images of the Thousand Buddhas are shown surrounding the sanctum, which is reserved for the highest spiritual level, represented by Vairocana. They are depicted in the uppermost zone of the outer wall and the inner wall of the ambulatory.<sup>34</sup> Below them—on the rear wall of the ambulatory—there is a row of the Buddhas of the Past plus Maitreya presiding over bodhisattvas on the side walls, while narrative images are depicted in a vertical hierarchy

<sup>33</sup> Bechert and Gombrich (1995: 72) explained that the theme foreshadows the emergence of Mahāyāna beliefs and rituals, where the repetition of prayers and action is given prime importance. “Sheer numbers acquire a mystical efficacy, and Halls of a thousand Buddhas reinforce the worshipper’s faith” (*ibid.*: 72).

A Khotanese scroll of the Thousand Buddha names ends by pointing out blessings secured by those who recite these names “and all sinful deeds disappear of those who do homage to the names of the divine lords” (Lokesh Chandra 1996: 5).

<sup>34</sup> The Thousand Buddhas are frequently depicted outside the *maṇḍala* in wall paintings at Nako, Lotsāba *lha khang*, and in Ladakh (Mangyu).



below. Such a configuration of the Seven Excellent Buddhas of the Past (Sangs rgyas rabs bdun) and Maitreya is also to be found on the rear wall of Dungkar Cave 2, with multiple bodhisattva images (representing the theme of the Thousand Bodhisattvas) covering the side walls and a *maṇḍala* dominating the whole ceiling. In the centre of this space at Dungkar is a *stūpa* comparable to the Zhag cave (Fig. 27; cf. also Pritzker 1996: fig. 17).<sup>35</sup>

The single seated Buddhas in the main hall are typically shown on lotus thrones wearing robes of different colours and patterns indicating their individuality.<sup>36</sup> As a characteristic feature, one fold of the robe is often held up in the left hand. The *mudrās*, most of them are variations of canonical hand gestures, primarily serve the purpose of variation as do the costumes and the shapes and colour schemes of the lotus bases. This capacity and sense of variation is a characteristic feature of the quality of this artistic phase and it is reminiscent of the style also found in contemporary book paintings such as those in the *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript at Pooh (sPu)

<sup>35</sup> A three-dimensional *maṇḍala* with Mañjuśrī at its centre (Dharmadhātu-vagīśvaramañjuśrī *maṇḍala*) is represented on the ceiling.

<sup>36</sup> Closer examinations of the ensemble will perhaps reveal signs of incisions or outlines of the overall layout of the repeat motifs, however the individual Buddhas show slight variations and thus were not made with stencils.

in Upper Kinnaur (Khu nu).<sup>37</sup> See also Kalantari, "Shaping space, constructing identity: the illuminated *Yum chen mo* at Pooh, Upper Kinnaur", this volume, pp. 363–405.

A contrasting feature, however, is the interest in naturalism, the physical presence of figures and almost "portrait-like" emotions. Characteristic are standing or walking Buddhas, shown in three-quarter profile, one arm hanging down with the hand stretched out to the side, the feet face the direction of movement. The folds of the monk's habit create loops at the hem; all these elements chronologically recall later Tibetan manuscript paintings, such as a colophon page from Dolpo in present-day Nepal (ca. 13<sup>h</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century; see Heller 2009: fig. 61 [Vol. Ca, N192] and another folio from this manuscript (*ibid.*: fig. 69, [vol. Ga, N405]). An earlier manuscript (Heller 2009: fig. 13 [Cambridge University Library, AsP Add. 1643, folio 216v] is also relevant for the illustration of the Newari-inspired West Tibetan artistic context of this school. Thus, while in the *Yum chen mo* manuscript it is luxury art and material culture that creates supramundane sacred realms that are intended to be splendid and glorified, at Zhag it is figural individuality and "the holy smile" of the Buddha that reflects supreme enlightenment.

A significant feature is that each of the Buddhas at Zhag is accompanied by inscriptions adding to the merits achieved by the donors, while the respective cartouches in the sanctum of Tabo have been painted but they are left empty.<sup>38</sup>

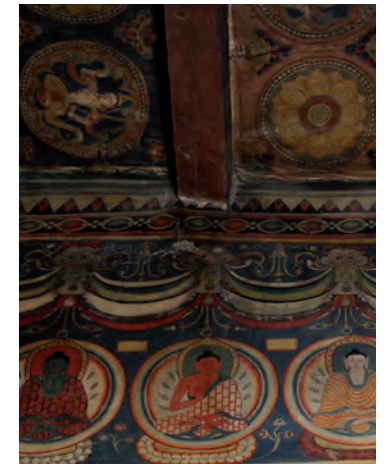
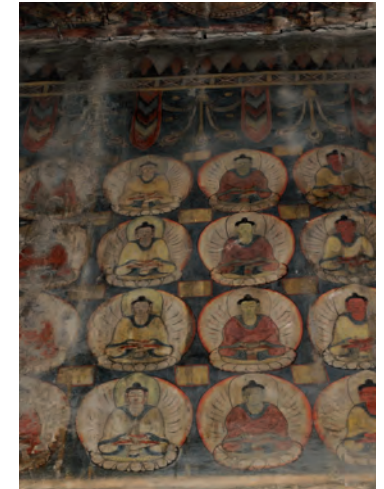
Another characteristic feature are short accompanying texts in the *jātaka* paintings. We also find such additional descriptive texts under images in the Tibetan manuscripts at Dolpo mentioned above.<sup>39</sup> This text-image relation contrasts to inscriptions representing the complete story, typical of the early phase of temples in the region, such as at Tabo, when Buddhism was introduced and essential truths were taken to the population.

In general the layout of the iconography recalls images of Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang, a theme frequently depicted in this period (Fig. 28). Like in the Zhag cave, the Buddhas typically cover the whole side walls of the sanctuary and surround a central pillar on which one or a group of images of historical Buddhas are placed.

<sup>37</sup> Eva Allinger (2006) discussed the process of manufacture and workshops applied in the manuscript from Pooh and to the knowledge of the authors she was the first who worked on the workshop structure and practice in the medium of book-paintings.

<sup>38</sup> These captions may reinforce the depiction and their magical efficacy "on the level of speech" (cf. Luczanits 2010: 7) but may also double the merit "accrued through its donation and veneration" (*ibid.*).

<sup>39</sup> Such descriptive texts are later typical in complex thangkas with multiple images. Zhag is thus perhaps an early example of this phenomenon.



25.–26. Tabo *gtsug lag khang*, theme of Thousand Buddhas in the sanctum (*dri gtsang khang*) (C. Kalantari, 2009).



27. Dungkar, Cave 2, a group of images of historical Buddhas on the back wall, Thousand Bodhisattvas, in the centre a *stūpa*, ceiling covered with a *maṇḍala* (C. Kalantari, 2007).

28. Dunhuang, (replica) cave of middle or late Tang period, ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century (C. Kalantari, 2010).

The Buddha in the centre or the *stūpa* with the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa surrounding it allude to the universal aspect of the Buddha, the sacred continuum of the *dharmā*, and reinforce the cosmological symbolism of the temple.<sup>40</sup> The temple's structure and programme can be interpreted as a realisation of the *trikāya*: the *stūpa* in the centre represents *dharmakāya*, the Buddhas emanating from this centre in all directions of the universe *saṃbhogakāya*, while the *jātakas*, donors, represent the *nirmāṇakāya*, placed in the corridor, representing the border between the profane and the sacred sphere.<sup>41</sup> A different, conservative conception of architectural space can be observed at Tabo, featuring a sanctum at the rear of the temple, where the image of the Buddha is venerated in a sacred enclosure.

#### Cosmopolitan Taste and Local Style: The Ceiling Compositions

The textile cover in the barrel-vaulted entrance hall mimics strips of cloth attached to the ceiling, achieving almost a *trompe l'oeil* effect (Fig. 29). Such textile depictions reflect local architectural traditions

<sup>40</sup> The conception is reminiscent of the Lotus *sūtra*, where the timelessness of the teachings and the infiniteness of the Buddha are propounded.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the temple as representation of the *trikāya* the inscription in the Alchi Sumtsek is indicative, which has been discussed by Goepper (1996: 269).

and materials of mud, rubble, stones and timber. These simple structures are covered with wooden ceilings decorated with textile representations. The ornaments also give an insight into various ritual actions and performances of devotion in the temple, such as the donation of costly items such as fabrics and ritual accoutrements of precious clothes. Gregory Schopen (1996: 112–14) explains how monastics were obliged to make use of the donations given as a way of generating merit for these donors (cf. also Rotman 2009: 55). The use of textiles as objects of achieving merit and as ritual paraphernalia in the temple was then also translated into the medium of painting emphasising the glory of the Buddha and his realm. The motifs in the corridor allude to Indian cotton prints and take up patterns and elements of material culture used in previous phases such as at Tabo (cf. Kalantari 2016).<sup>42</sup> This notion of continuation of elements of material and ornamental culture and their variation is a distinctive feature in this artistic tradition and it plays an important role in the construction of a distinctive West Tibetan visual identity.<sup>43</sup> As will be

<sup>42</sup> For specific aspects focusing on the *maṇḍala* ceilings in Dungkar see Klimburg-Salter (2001) and Neumann (2007); for comparative analyses of representations of textiles and of the symbolism of motifs on ceiling compositions of early West Tibetan temples see Papa-Kalantari 2000 and 2007, and Tshe ring gyal po and Papa-Kalantari (2010) .

<sup>43</sup> The adoption of ornaments from earlier periods mimicking Indian printed cottons in the corridor is remarkable insofar as the textiles of the Buddhas



29. Zhag cave, textile depictions in the barrel-vaulted entrance corridor, decoration mimics strips of cloth (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).



30. Fragments of centralised ceiling composition above the main hall (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2009).

shown, it also demonstrates the close evolutionary relation to early Western Himalayan schools with distinctive regional characteristics.

The effect of a vertical boundary or protective fabric cover in the textile depictions in the corridor contrasts with the more elaborate (perhaps originally) centralised composition in the main hall following a new conceptual and stylistic trend in this region (Fig. 30). It shows lotus tendrils, alluding to pedestals for deities and almost opening the ceiling to heaven. This "open composition" is in

do not display these textile motifs. Thus we can assume that the fabrics were no longer known from direct experience by the artists. The keeping up with characteristic themes and elements of local material culture consecrated and sanctified through tradition in the West Tibetan temples in the region of various periods and regional variations is a conscious method of legitimisation and continuation and sense of belonging.

contrast to the dominance of architectonic ceiling structures at Tabo and Nako, to which textile depictions are subordinated alluding to a sheltering cover, whereas *maṅḍala* ceilings at Dungkar and "domes of heaven" in Zhag and Nyiwang (Nyi dbang) reflect a new interest in the vertical dimension of space. In this artistic trend all dimensions of space in the temple are integrated into a unified vision of the Buddhist world system in which the royal elite and the practitioner are embedded.

The decorative style of the extant ceiling paintings in the Zhag cave perhaps alludes to intricate silks from Central Asia. Similar ceiling decorations can be found at Dunhuang, featuring a synthesis of honorific covers and cosmological allusions. Dorothy Wong (2008: 57) has shown that Chinese and Indian cosmologies co-existed on the ceilings of early Buddhist temples in Dunhuang (with celestial

symbols, nature spirits and airborne beings alluding combining Chinese conceptions of the heavenly realm with Indian concepts of the cosmos, centring around Mount Meru).

With regard to the cosmological allusions, a small cave sanctuary at Nyiwang in the Tiyag (gTi g.yag) area (for an image see Tsering Gyalpo 2006: illustration section, before p. 1) features a ceiling composition that imitates an opening to a heaven, in which dwell airborne divinities, sacred geese, wind gods, swirling lions and pearl circles, alluding to the stars. In this cave, too, the Thousand Buddha-theme covers the side walls and it is also closely stylistically related to the Dungkar-Phyang (Phyi dbang)-Zhag school.<sup>44</sup>

This progression in elaboration and scale of ornament implies that decorative elements on the ceilings were perceived as elements of differentiation between distinct kinds of sacred space. The spiritual hierarchy is also reflected in the ceiling composition at Tabo.<sup>45</sup> The lotus ornament (*padma*) is an important element with iconographic significance as symbol of the Buddha, and plays a role in the shaping and hierarchisation of sacred space in India both in Hindu and Buddhist architectural traditions from very early on.<sup>46</sup>

The scientific reconstruction of the artistic context is still in its infancy. The ornamental language at Zhag appears to translate Sinocising Central Asian features, and in particular those of the Tangut Xia dynasty (982–1227). A tentative comparison is provided by a silk tapestry (Watt and Wardwell 1997: cat. no. 24, p. 91), dateable to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, representing characteristic floral vine scrolls across the bottom and borders of U-shaped bows with dots in the centre. These are found as separating elements between the ceiling and the walls. Significant parallels are also to be found in centralised ceiling decorations at Dunhuang (Papa-Kalantari 2000: fig. 12), featuring compositions of lotus tendrils in the centre framed by valance-

<sup>44</sup> This distinctive conception of centralised ceiling designs is related to single-chamber sanctuaries at Dungkar, with their characteristic raised niches in the rear wall in which sculptures are placed combined with three-dimensional structures of the ceilings. One of them features a centralised decorative scheme alluding to honorific and devotional textiles combined with cosmological allusions (Papa-Kalantari 2000 and 2007, Kalantari 2016). These spatial traditions are reminiscent of cave temples at Dunhuang from the Tang to the Western Xia periods, some of them featuring niches and trapezoid sloping roofs mimicking specific architectural traditions with pagoda-like roofs combined with lantern ceilings (cf. Klimburg-Salter 2001; Neumann 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Giuseppe Tucci (1935) was the first to interpret early Western Himalayan temple's ceilings as symbolic representations of canopies, which was later adopted by Klimburg-Salter (1997) in the interpretation of various different and diverse types of ceilings in Afghanistan and Western Tibet.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. e.g. Ribba, Lotsāba *lha khang*.

like bows, which allude to chains of lotus petals.<sup>47</sup> Concerning the historical context of this cultural interrelation, the Xi Xia (Western Xia) Buddhist state in Gansu Province controlled a line on oases along the Silk Route and traded large quantities of silk (Watt and Wardwell 1997: 12). Most thangkas from this period have been found in Central Tibet and Khara Khoto. The close ethnic and religious ties with Tibet were perhaps the basis of a substantial intercultural transfer and trade in luxury items are a possible medium of this exchange contributing to a specific West Tibetan stylistic idiom with Chinese Central-Asian features. As Luczanits pointed out, the art of Dungkar (featuring complex ceiling decorations which include exotic, Sinocising motifs and cosmological symbolism) also marks the beginning of new religious trends with an emphasis on Anuttara Yoga teachings (*bla na med pa'i rgyud*), with the teacher as the living Buddha, which may have arrived via Central Tibet (cf. Luczanits 2004: 7; 210; 213). It is possible that Nepal functioned as a corridor of communication in this process of religio-artistic flows, as stylistic parallels in the figural style suggest.

#### Observations on the Interrelation of Spatial Structure, Programme and Ritual

The architectural structure of the Zhag cave contrasts with the typology of sacred space, with a focus of worship in a cella, enclosure or niche, positioned on the opposite side of the portal, representing an Indic system of a horizontal hierarchy of space. The latter reflects specific forms of devotion, namely forms of the cult of the Buddha, and focus of devotion in a chamber that shelters the cult image similar to Hindu forms of ritual devotion. This type of chamber is also typical for early single-chamber Buddhist temples in Himachal Pradesh (Lotsāba *lha khang* in Ribba, Mirkulā Devī in Udaipur) sheltered by a wooden façade or portal featuring intricate wood-carvings. In contrast, at Zhag the spiritual focus of space is free-standing and placed at the centre of the main hall featuring a *stūpa*. The latter is ritually circumambulated by the devotee and offerings are placed there. As a significant contrasting feature, this centre does not represent an enclosure with one opening towards the assembly hall, but it is free-standing and thus oriented towards

<sup>47</sup> Horizontal friezes featuring rectangles in alternating colours are derived from stylised railings on the uppermost section of walls, above which typically there are deities making music and celestial dancers showering their offerings on the Buddhas below.

For a comparative analysis between Western Himalayan temples and decorative programmes in the Dunhuang caves, see Papa-Kalantari (2000), cf. also Klimburg-Salter (2001: 165) proposing analogies between *maṇḍala* ceilings in Dungkar and Xi Xia-period ceilings in Yulin and Dunhuang.



all directions of space. The programme of the walls is closely related to the centre of devotion, the *stūpa* (cf. *The Fortunate Aeon* 1986). Examples of this spatial concept are temples with a roughly square ground plan featuring four-fold Vairocana images as the ritual focus (e.g. at Lalung) as well as the Alchi-*stūpas* with an inner *stūpa* for circumambulation at their centres; the Sumtsek at Alchi also has a *stūpa* at its centre.<sup>48</sup> The cave temples in Western Tibet are among the most consequent representations of this concept reflecting specific religious functions and ritual demands. Longitudinal temples (with cultic centres at the opposite side of the portal) combine the function of spaces for monastic rituals as well as centres for personal worship by the devotee through ritual actions of circumambulation and donation.<sup>49</sup> Centralised single-chamber temples with a focus on devotion (*stūpa* or cult image) in the centre—as found at Dungkar and Zhag—may be mainly associated with meditative, devotional needs of practitioners, as well as specific ritual needs such as initiation. Dungkar Caves 1 and 2 are examples of sacred spaces lacking a sanctum for circumambulation or a niche featuring a focus of worship. Instead of a static hierarchy with the highest spiritual level at the centre of the wall opposite the portal, at Dungkar there is a programme that indicates a dynamic perception, which is further emphasised by the narrative of the Life of the Buddha running around the whole temple at Dungkar Cave 1. These architectonic types of cave temples in Dungkar and Zhag perhaps developed—if also certainly not exclusively—in interaction with cave temples

<sup>48</sup> Temples with niches in the cardinal directions, such as the Alchi Sumtsek also have central cult images, but their ground plan may derive from different architectural traditions. This is in particular the case for complex structures such as the Tholing *gtsug lag khang* with a mandalic ground plan and internal spatial configuration. Interestingly, Kozicz (2008–2009) first drew attention to the presence of niches in the ambulatory of the sanctum at Nyarma (see also Hubert Feiglstorfer, “The architecture of the Buddhist temple complex of Nyarma”, this volume, pp. 233–236, for new aspects on this spatial concept). See also Kalantari, “Note on the spatial iconography of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang*”, this volume, pp. 262–263, for typological comparisons of centralised spatial layouts.

The centralised and cruciform layout with four doors/niches in the cardinal directions and a central *garbhagrha* is known as a *sarvatobhadra* temple and described in the *Vāstu śāstras* (cf. Pāhārpur and Mainamati). Cf. Kramrisch 1976: 418f.

<sup>49</sup> While at Zhag the theme of the Thousand Buddhas covers the whole main hall, as a contrasting feature at Tabo the space representing the highest level of wisdom represented in the cella and the ambulatory around the centre of devotion. There the uppermost zone and inner walls of the ambulatory are adorned with images of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. All this reflects a horizontal hierarchy and a dynamic spiritual progression towards the sanctum typical of the earliest phase of temples in the region founded at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

in Central Asia such as Dunhuang featuring a ritual focus, often a figurative pillar for ritual circumambulation—placed in the centre of sacred space (accordingly they are called pillar caves, *stūpa* pillar caves). However, the evolutionary history and complex stratigraphy of these types of spaces, in conjunction with their programme and ritual use, is a task for future research. They contrast to a more “conservative” architectonic type with a sanctum at the end of a longitudinal structure found in the early phase of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* around the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Tabo renovation phase (mid-11<sup>th</sup> century) displays a transformation of spatial organisation to centralised hierarchies, as reflected in the interior decorations of the *'du khang* and the sanctum-cum-ambulatory, transforming these spaces to mandalic sites. This new system is shown in the paintings of the sanctum, and most strikingly in the free-standing four-fold Vairocana clay image in clay in the *'du khang*, thereby combining a conservative spatial organisation with an innovative iconographic concept and symbolism of space. As an additional indicative feature the programme of the sanctum-cum-ambulatory of the Tabo renovation period (mid-11<sup>th</sup> century) appears to represent a program closed within itself and guarded by protectors depicted on the wall above the portal.<sup>50</sup>

This “modern” tendency coincides with the emergence of new religious trends with an emphasis on Five-Buddha-configurations and images facing the cardinal directions of space. This concept is also reflected in a four-fold bronze of Vairocana from Taglung monastery Central Tibet (cf. Luczanits 2004: fig. on p. 200), which has strong parallels to the four-fold image in the centre of the Tabo *'du khang*. This marks a significant shift in the perception and ritual use of sacred space in the evolutionary history of early Western Himalayan temple art.

To summarise the overall programme in the entrance hall or corridor features a thematic set of the *saṃsāracakra*, donors' images plus inscriptions and protectors. A narrative (*jātaka*) complements this thematic set, which in earlier temples is typically reserved for the lowest zone following the direction of circumambulation; one example is the Tabo *'du khang* and ambulatory. At Zhag the *saṃsāracakra* and the Tiger *jātaka*—featuring episodes from the previous lives of the Buddha and portraying a prince who attains a high degree on the path of awakening consciousness—are shown in a spatial relationship. Both themes share the ideas of favourable

<sup>50</sup> See also Luczanits and Neuwirth (2010: 81) describing the three floors of the Alchi Sumtsek as three superimposed temples with a consistent iconographic programme inside.

The position of protectors in the cella perhaps reflects a similar phenomenon to the niches in the ambulatory of Nyarma, situated on the side and rear walls, reminiscent of the portals of a *maṇḍala*.

rebirths due to an ethical life and even the possibility of the rebirth as kings and bodhisattvas, expressed in the *saṃsāracakra*. They thus emphasise the didactic values designed to encourage the devotee to contemplate the basic truths of Buddhism when entering the temple.

Both the entrance hall and main hall reflect conservative religious trends; the first relates to Mahāyāna beliefs of early Buddhism, with an emphasis on instructions given in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*—as also frequently depicted in early Buddhist temples such as at Ajanta. The main hall features a *stūpa* at the centre—representing *dharmakāya*—generating Buddhas dwelling in all directions of space.<sup>51</sup> The programme of images of the Thousand Buddhas, rather oriented towards conservative Mahāyāna Buddhist thought—which is found as a parallel phenomenon at Dunhuang—with little tantric iconography.<sup>52</sup> The images of Thousand Buddhas are arranged around a central image *stūpa* as the centre of devotion. There the devotee pays respect by various ritual actions such as circumambulation and veneration through offerings.

The Zhag cave still serves as an offering place (*mchod khang*) for veneration by local practitioners and pilgrims from outside as well as a place of meditation for great masters today. Its function of course contrasts to that of free-standing temples, which were mainly designed for ceremonies of monastic communities and which also meet the religious demands of the local population. Especially during festive days (*tshe bzang dus bzang*), such as the 5<sup>th</sup>, the 8<sup>th</sup>, the 15<sup>th</sup>, the 25<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the month, devotees pay respect to the Buddhas and worship the *stūpa* in the Zhag cave, where they accrue merits by offering butter lamps, water, food and sacred scarves.

The typology of the Zhag cave and its features is very common in mNga' ris, with examples found in the Ruthok (Ru thog) gTing chung *lha khang* and in several painted *stūpas* in Alchi (e.g. the Great Stūpa), in the Sangs rgyas stong sku *lha khang* in the Ru thog dBod byang area, in the Wa chen grotto (Tshe ring gyal po 2012), and in sanctuaries in the Riba (Ri pa) area in Western Tibet (see Tshe ring rgyal po 2006: 314f.). Related programmes can also be found in the three grottoes at Dungkar (today referred to by the local population collectively as “Dung dkar za sgo phug gsum”; cf. *ibid.*: 231) which are close to the Zhag cave, on the same side of Sutlej river (Glang chen gtsang po). As regards the Zhag cave's sect affiliation, the programme in the Zhag cave temple suggests a relation with the

<sup>51</sup> How the cult of the *Bhakraḥkalpikasūtra* was performed in the temple and how Buddhist thoughts generate specific types of temple is question for future research.

<sup>52</sup> We are indebted to Eva Allinger for discussions on various topics in this paper and her deep insights regarding religious and stylistic questions.

sNgags gsar ma, “Secret New Mantra” or “New Translation school” (of “New” Tantras). This school was very strong in this area in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the sects adhering to them had close relations with the early Guge kingdom, which presided over the area during the period in which the cave's programme was developed.

This conservative general programme is in line with the intention of the religious elite and their goal of establishing core Buddhist truths in the region. In contrast to the rather conservative programme, there are innovative features consistent within this political and religious-artistic phase of the 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries: firstly the prominent representation of donors as devotees and engaged in various rituals. The detailed depiction of donors in the entrance hall in close relation to cosmological imagery and the *saṃsāracakra* is a distinctive feature of West Tibetan art. Sponsors of the temple and aristocratic practitioners are integrated into the whole programme and their function appears to go beyond the mere commemoration of the act of donation as religious merit. They appear to be portrayed in rituals related to the consecration and sanctification of the temple ground and as embedded in a cosmogonic narrative strengthening their legitimising roots.<sup>53</sup> They are typically accompanied by extensive written eulogies to their deeds.

The second new feature is the dominant role of local protectors related to the ruling elite, which perhaps incorporates various local (pre-Buddhist) features (see Appendix). All this establishes a distinctive relation of political sovereignty, religious authority and (military) power, perhaps also efficacious against external adversaries. This confrontation/configuration of conservative and innovative features creates a specific Tibetan articulation of religious art of this region under royal West Tibetan patronage.

#### **Appendix (Christiane Kalantari). The Royal Ram-rider at Zhag: Some Remarks on His Iconographic, Artistic and Religio-Political Context**

Concerning the identity of the mounted warrior (Figs. 31–34) I have discussed aspects of the history of this type of local territorial deity in Western Tibet elsewhere (Papa-Kalantari 2010), giving insight into the religious landscape in Western Tibet which was not only shaped by spiritual concerns but also by pragmatic political interests and military concerns. The popularity of these spirits can be understood as an aspect of a socio-religious atmosphere, marked by the interest

<sup>53</sup> This prominent depiction was less typical in the Indian heartland during the period of the Pāla dynasty, which existed up to the 70s of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but was more frequent in Central Asia, e.g. Dunhuang, perhaps also in Nepal at that time.



31. Rider in the corridor at Dungkar, Cave 1 (C. Kalantari, 2007).

32. Rider above the opening to the main hall at Dungkar, Cave 1 (C. Kalantari, 2007).

in guardian deities designed to grant security and military protection of trade routes and outer borders of the political domain. This group of male guardians complements and perhaps partly replaces the dominance of female spirits in earlier periods, and may have integrated ancient indigenous spirits as protectors (*srung ma*) of Buddhist temples (cf. Jahoda 2006).

The (ram-)rider appears to merge the military and the holy embodying ideals of protection associated with martial culture and local equestrian/hunting traditions also including military status culture and insignia of the ruling elites. The military ethos of the religious-political elite as reflected in the warrior-like guardian with fearsome weapons is also referred to in an edict (*chos rtsigs*) issued by Ye shes 'od. Among the *rgyal khrim*s, the secular laws, a prominent position was given to the defence of the kingdom as well as to military training, to which all were called to contribute (cf. Vitali 1996: 212). One of the guardian spirits that can tentatively be associated with this class of guardian in early West Tibetan temples—and who is mentioned in relevant texts—is Pe har, who had a complex career in Central Asia and Tibet. He was seen as guardian of treasures of the kingdom in Central Asia and as a tutelary deity of the local dynasty of Khotan (see also Hazod 2005: 284f.). He was transferred to Tibet and bound on oath to protect the monastery of Samye (bSam yas).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> According to the Tibetan legend, on initiative of Padmasambhava Pe har was caught by a *yakṣa*, a companion of Vaiśravaṇa. He was then brought to Samye and appointed to the position of the tutelary deity of the monastery where he was bound by oath to protect the monastic treasure. His cult may have been transferred to Western Tibet very early on by the descendants of the old dynasty and their aristocratic allies. In general the transfer of a tutelary deity is a constant theme of political theology in Tibet, and Pe har was appointed to

The earliest written evidence of Pe har in the Western Himalayas can be found in this religious edict, according to which members of the royal family had to take a solemn oath of its regulations with Pehar as witness. In addition, the biography of Rin chen bzang po, possibly written by one of his disciples in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, describes how female spirits bound by oath on the occasion of the monastery's consecration were made to promise to protect the Buddhist religion and to guard the possessions of the temple. One passage characterises a male spirit as follows: "Putting the Oblate Goat-Skin-Clad under oath, he made him work as personal attendant and made him responsible for guarding the possessions of all the temples of Rong-chung. This one is master of the demons [...]. [a]lso known as [...] Pehar" (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 93).<sup>55</sup> The text demonstrates the close relationship of

guard the treasures of the temples in Western Tibet, reflecting a process already undertaken during the time of the old Tibetan monarchy.

<sup>55</sup> The variation in the appearance of the mounted hero in Himalayan art reflects the different geographic-cultural contexts and political units. At Dungkar the deity is mounted on a ram with emphasis on the aura of the nomadic hunter, while the emphasis at Alchi is on powerful protection and martial arts, the ideal of the courageous equestrian, mounted warrior, reflecting the pride of the aristocratic elite and powerful rulers of small kingdom in Ladakh with their Iranianising culture. The armed riders are a paradigm for the demonstration of the ethos of rule in lower Ladakh, and a demonstration of military and economic prowess as the basis of security in the region. The role of landowner and land is also protecting trade routes on the Indus and thus the prosperity of the region.

The kaftan of the horseman at Alchi is made of a precious medallion silk featuring lions and ducks, while the band on his forearms recalls the *ki'la* robes of honour from the Islamic courtly sphere, which may have been traded in the region. The decoration of the shield is precisely executed, probably signalling the individuality of the owner. Images of horses are part of the self-representation of the Tibetan ruling elite from very early on. The horse is depicted as a sign of sovereignty of the ruling elite at Nako (*Lotsāba lha khang*). The riderless horse

33. Mahākāla configuration in the Alchi 'Du khang (Ladakh) above the portal, royal horse rider in the right upper section (courtesy J. Poncar, 1983).

34. Mahākāla-configuration in the Alchi Mañjuśrī temple ('Jam pa'i lha khang) (Ladakh) (C. Kalantari, 2009).



the ruling elite to patron deities, which are still a central element in the religious practice today.<sup>56</sup>

The popularity of this type of local territorial spirit may have been superimposed by the emergence of the powerful protector of the *dharma*, Mahākāla, one of whose attendants according to textual sources is a male warrior. A specific aspect of the nature of Mahākāla is his entourage or "court", called ministers.<sup>57</sup> Among the various companions are also mounted horsemen, while some are messengers (*pho nya*), frequently animals, collectively called the *spyan gzigs* (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 21). In the Alchi Sumtsek, a Mahākāla depiction features a horseman in local garb in the upper left-hand corner holding a human head and a sword, with an attendant bearing a skull cup. He thus shows the closest resemblance to the attributes found in canonical Mahākāla iconography.

Relevant in this context is the complex history of the flying black *bse* mask—summarised by Vitali<sup>58</sup>—which can be traced back to the West Tibetan Mahākāla tradition associated with Rin chen bzang po. According to his biography, he received the mask and the instructions associated with it from his teacher, a Kashmiri master, serving later on for the protection of the new teachings in Western Tibet (see also Hazod 2005: 284). Vitali 2001: 37, n. 44) poses the question of the flight of the *bse 'bag* mask to Western Tibet having not only religious implications: "Can the fact that mGon.po granted warlike powers be applied to the case of lo.chen [Rin chen bzang po]. In other words, was lo.chen also serving the purpose, with the appointment of Ma.ha.ka.la as the protector of West Tibet, of the

in the donor image appears to signal readiness for battle. The strong cultural force of equestrian and military pride as a component of local status culture is an important element in the visual construction of political as well as religious authority.

<sup>56</sup> The relation between rDo rje chen mo (which perhaps integrated pre-Buddhist local divinities) and the kings of Guge is a paradigm for their role. The rider at Alchi wears exactly the same robes of protector as in drinking scene, perhaps the founding generation, related to the ancestral village deity, which was present and summoned to guard the temple at the time of its foundation.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Linrothe 2004: 49. One example is a thangka of the Sakya (Sa skya) lineage dateable to the 12<sup>th</sup> century featuring Raudrantika (the killer of Raudra) typically depicted holding a lance (sometimes also a sword) and a skull bowl and riding a black horse (*ibid.*: 61). This mounted heroic spirit is regarded as one of the four members of his outer retinue. The Alchi Lotsāba *lha khang* features protectors showing eight riders each holding a flag; the latter attribute is typical of early Raudrantika images just mentioned.

<sup>58</sup> Vitali's summary (2001) is based on a 17<sup>th</sup>-century text, which is connected with the mythic history of Gur mgon of the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa); see also Hazod (2005: 284f. for a summary); for further descriptions of Mahākāla's history see: also Linrothe 2004: 44. Various Anuttara Yoga Tantras teach various forms of Mahākāla; the principal texts are the Twenty-Five and Fifty Chapter Mahākāla Tantra.

defence of the Gu.ge Pu.hrang kingdom against the enemies from the borders, a necessity promoted by a law in Ye.shes.'od's *bka'.shog chen.mo*, which laymen and monks were equally called to observe?"<sup>59</sup> His assumption appears to match well with representations of heroic local protectors and the visual construction of power and authority in this period. It is thus possible that in Western Tibet the heroic type of male protector was included in the cult of Mahākāla, which has overlapping functions.

Evidence of the cult of a group of martial territorial deities is found not only in imagery and texts, but also in popular Buddhist practice, such as in folk epic and festival traditions in Kinnaur and in popular ritual practice in Western Tibet (Khorchag). Pe har, together with Dabla (dGra lha, also sGra bla)<sup>60</sup> is still collectively worshipped today at Pooh (a village of historical significance which may have had a considerable position during the Guge kingdom period). Dabla (still present at Khorchag in the form of a male warrior; cf. Jahoda and Kalantari 2012: 140–41, fig. 94) previously lived in a specific sacred space on the uppermost storey of the Khorchag Jo khang temple.<sup>61</sup>

Concerning the wider religious-political function in Western Tibet, further interdisciplinary studies will be necessary to investigate their role as protectors of the borders. Relevant in this context may be the classification among the different protective tasks, in particular one attributed to the *mtshams (gyi) srung (ma)*, signifying "border

<sup>59</sup> A Sakya hierarch was renowned for his power to summon mGon po in aid of the Mongol armies (Cf. Vitali 2001).

The cult of Mahākāla, his martial power and protective ferocity were linked to Mongol emperorship. The Mongols' patron relationship enabled Qublai Khan to dominate Tibet in a joint secular and religious rulership with Lama 'Phag pa in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Mahākāla was used as war standard under the Mongols (<http://www.himalayanart.org/news/archives.cfm/category/mahakala>). Qing emperors supported Tibetan Buddhism and Mahākāla, claiming the heritage of Mongol empire "most crucially its military prowess and its political relationship to religion" (Waley-Cohen 2006: 102).

<sup>60</sup> The function of Dabla is to protect people and their possessions (concerning dGra lha, see also Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 318–40).

<sup>61</sup> During joint fieldwork (with Christian Jahoda) at Pooh in mid-October 2009, the performance of the Sherken festival featuring cults that display a synthesis of pre-Buddhist (denominated by locals as Bon), Buddhist and Hindu traditions and also seem to preserve a memory of Pe har, was studied. Rituals include the worship of local village deities (*yul lha*), represented by *gtor mas*. During the festival offerings in form of animals are also donated to the main protective deities, which besides Dabla (at Pooh conceived as a female divinity and also as *yul lha*, local village deity) also include Besara, perhaps Pe har (cf. Jahoda 2011: 27 and 2012: 40). According to the local master of the ritual, one of these stands for Besara (or Pesara), as represented by a sheep. In ancient times Besara appeared during specific ceremonies and his medium (*lha bdag*) was still alive one generation previously in Pooh village, while another medium is still active at Namgya. An informant further stated that this god is worshipped in private house chapels, and is regarded as the supporter of the king.

guardian" (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 5). For example Dabla—which perhaps played an important role in historic times—belongs to a group of nine brother-and-sister divinities, imagined as guardians of a federation of villages, perhaps related to a political-administrative function (cf. Jahoda 2011 and 2012: 39).<sup>62</sup> In this way a sacred landscape is shaped that is protected by guardians who have their abode at some locality close to the border and whose special task is to prevent hostile foreigners from entering the political domain and to defend its temples and institutions against adversaries. While the religio-political role of the warrior/hunter god in the Western Himalayas can be partly reconstructed, the definition of the complex stratigraphy of its identity must remain a task for future interdisciplinary research.

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<sup>62</sup> Significant in this context is the fact that the Pooh temple is denominated 'border-protecting temple' in relevant Tibetan historical sources (see Jahoda, "The foundation of the Nyarma gtsug lag khang, Ladakh", this volume, pp. 284–287).

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