

REMARKS ON THE PRACTICE OF INSTALLING LHATHOS OF TERRITORIAL GUARDIANS INSIDE BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

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A crucial factor for the successful establishment of Buddhism among Tibetan and Himalayan societies from the 10th century onwards was the integration of pre-Buddhist local myths into the art and architecture of the new doctrine. Depictions of territorial spiritual forces were incorporated into the Buddhist theological and iconographic systems, while *lhathos*, archaic chairns that were considered as seats of local guardians, became part of the specific architecture in the whole Himalayan landscape. The following article presents a few case-studies to describe the beginning of this phenomenon and discuss further developments. The specific interest is on the physical transfer of *lhathos* into orthodox Buddhist temples and their installation in eminent positions inside assembly halls or even inside main niches of a sanctum.

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Kluczowym czynnikiem udanego wprowadzania buddyzmu w społeczeństwach tybetańskich i himalajskich począwszy od X wieku, było włączenie przed-buddyjskich lokalnych mitów do sztuki i architektury nowej doktryny. Przedstawienia terytorialnych sił duchowych zostały włączone do buddyjskich systemów teologicznych i ikonograficznych, podczas gdy *lhathos*, archaiczne siedziska bóstw, które były uważane za siedziby lokalnych strażników, stały się częścią architektury w całym krajobrazie himalajskim. Poniższy artykuł przedstawia kilka studiów przypadku, w celu opisanie początków tego zjawiska oraz omawia dalszy jego rozwój. Szczególne zainteresowanie polega na fizycznym przeniesieniu *lhathos* do ortodoksyjnych świątyń buddyjskich i ich instalacji w zaszczytnych miejscach w halach zgromadzeń lub nawet w głównych niszach sanktuarium.

Key words: Lhatho, Buddhism, Ladakh, Tibet, sacral architecture, Shang-Shung tradition, Rinchen Zangpo, Dorje Chenmo, deities.

INTRODUCTION¹

Little is known so far about the early history of the Northwestern Himalaya region following the collapse of the Tibetan Empire and prior to the formation of the Buddhist Kingdom of Guge and Purang in the 10th century. Presumably, a variety of factors

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were influential on the socio-cultural developments in the region, by that time known as Maryul and Ladakh. On the one hand, the valleys of the Indus and its tributaries had been integral parts of the trans-Himalayan trading routes and thereby remained in contact with the Buddhist kingdoms of Khotan, Brusha and Gilgit to its North and West as well as with neighboring Kashmir, where Buddhism was tolerated but Shaivism dominated. Since pilgrims and religious practitioners of all these religions travelled the same routes on their way to Mount Kailash in Western Tibet, then it would be fair to say that these regions had a remarkable religious and cultural impact on this part of the Himalayas. On the other hand, the geographic conditions had also been conducive for the continuing practice of local traditions based on cults rooted in the mighty pre-Buddhist kingdom of Shang Shung that had been annexed by the Tibetans in the 7th century – socio-cultural and religious milieu commonly referred to as Bön. The remoteness of side valleys and in particular the temporary inaccessibility of a vast portion of the region due to topographic and climatic constraints also provided the groundwork for non-orthodox Buddhist teachings that were condemned by orthodox followers of the Faith as heretic.

What followed the establishment of the political and military power of Guge and Purang over the region was an enormous endeavor that aimed at establishing an orthodox monastic Buddhist system. The ideological starting point was an edict by King Yeshe Ö [*Ye shes 'Od*] particularly addressed to the heretics and aimed at erasing their practices within his dominion and unifying the society within a Buddhist socio-cultural system in 986 CE. This was followed by the foundation of the cruciform Main Temple in the capital Tholing, also known as the “Temple of Yeshe Ö”, as the religious center of the dominion and the large-scale network of monastic edifices and temples that were to be built during this so-called Second Diffusion of the Faith (of Buddhism).

In the north-western part of their kingdom, the first step undertaken to establish their socio-cultural and religious sovereignty was the foundation of the monastic center of Nyarma in Maryul, only a few kilometers south-east of Shey, the regional administrative center of that period. The architectural concept of the Main Temple of Tholing was not only the largest one but also the only one which exactly mirrored the mandala principles of the North-Indian stupa temples. All the other major edifices in the region under discussion were still based on the same geometric principles despite oblong-shaped plans². At Tholing, the chapels of the five Tathagatas of the

of several lhathos and sites in Ladakh. I also wish to express my gratitude to Noor Jahan Chunka and Heinrich Poell for allowing me to reproduce their pictures in this article. I thank Eduardo Ferrari for sharing his material collected during field research in 2015 which added significant data to this essay. Finally, I thank Tasha Kimmert and Diana Lange for their comments and remarks at various stages of production of this essay.

² I discussed this subject on various occasions. For the geometric principles of the temples of Nyarma and the Indian models see Kozicz 2008–2009, 9–21, and for Tabo see Kozicz 2014, 70–75.

Vajradhatumandala formed not only the innermost sanctum of the temple but also the spiritual center of the whole dominion. Thereby, the ideal mandalic order of the Five-Family configuration was literally superimposed over the topography of the dominion. The mastermind – or in a way the supervising “architect” – behind this temple and also the construction of the large network of monastic institutions was Rinchen Zangpo [*Rin chen bzang po*], the “Great Translator”³.

The Vajradhatumandala was undoubtedly the major subject ideologically, iconographically and also architecturally, that prevailed throughout the era of the Second Diffusion. Aside from its clear aim to adopt orthodox Buddhism of the early Vajrayana doctrine, the inclusion of local beliefs into the monastic system and teachings was also sought at the same time. The subjugation and appointment of local divinities and spirits as protectors of the faith (*dharmapala*) through binding them by an oath had already been a strategy during the tantric master Padmasambhava’s times. Such a story was reported about the foundation of a temple by Rinchen Zangpo in his ancestral place, where some water spirits had to be subdued and turned into temple protectors⁴.

Another act of integration of indigenous beliefs with Buddhism is related to the protectress Dorje Chenmo [*rDo rje chen mo*], the personal guardian deity of Rinchen Zangpo⁵. She is said to have been installed as both the protectress of Tholing and Nyarma (Vitali 1999, 24⁶). The major buildings were thereby linked not only through their architectural concepts, but also through this protectress⁷. As discussed by Christian Jahoda in his study on the tutelary deity of the Great Translator and her depictions in the temples of Tabo, Dorje Chenmo was amalgamated with Winyumyin, a local protector of the Tabo area, whose local cult Jahoda considers to predate the establishment of the Buddhist monastic complex (Jahoda 2006, 19–28). Even though historical data is not sufficient to allow Jahoda to reconstruct the process of amalgamation in detail, the concept behind it was clearly the incorporation of an earlier local cult

³ Rinchen Zangpo is credited with the foundation of an auspicious number of 108 temples. Although there are standardized architectural rules that govern the design of a significant number of surveyed temples of this era, I am inclined to consider Rinchen Zangpo to be the mastermind and organizer rather than the actual person in charge of design and construction of every single temple ascribed to him.

⁴ For a description of this event see the biography of Rinchen Zangpo (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980, 93).

⁵ According to Rene de Nebesky Wójcikowitz (1956, 36) Dorje Chenmo may be regarded an emanation or even a form of Palden Lhamo [*dPal ldan lha mo*] or Sri Devi.

⁶ Quoting from the biography of Rinchen Zangpo by Lobsang Zotpa [*Blobzang bzodpa*] *Rin.chen bzang po'i nam.thar*. p. 15 lines 3–4, Tibetan text in Appendix 8, Tib. 27.

⁷ Due to the complete loss of the iconographic program and artistic decoration it is impossible to ascertain the actual cycle and main deity of any of the temples of Nyarma. At the time of the 2002 survey the center of the assembly hall of the Main Temple still had the lion throne of Vairocana, but only the ruined seat and the base as well as the empty mandorlas on the rear wall and near the entrance have survived. All the sculptures have gone and it is therefore impossible to ascertain the actual identity of the cycle at Nyarma.



Fig. 1: Charang Vairocana with the small wooden image of Rangrig Dungma almost completely hidden behind the large-size wooden sculptures (photo: G. Kozicz).



Fig. 2: The small wooden image of Rangrig Dungma (photo: G. Kozicz)

into the Buddhist doctrinal system. Obstacles to the endeavor of establishing Dorje Chenmo's identity – or rather the moment when the amalgamation was completed and the figure actually came into being Dorje Chenmo – at Tabo are iconographic variants among the depictions of Dorje Chenmo, deviations from the textual descriptions as well as the loss of the earliest mural depicting her (Jahoda 2006, 25).

In his study, Jahoda also discusses the case of Rangrig Spulma of Charang, locally known as Rangrig Dungma, the protectress of another temple related to Rinchen Zangpo. Her iconographic features are identical to those of Dorje Chenmo. She is depicted as a wooden sculpture and placed on a small altar directly below Vairocana who had once been the central figure of a sculptural Vajradhatu mandala set to which

the temple had originally been dedicated. Jahoda suggests that the name of “Rangrig” Dungma refers to an earlier local deity and that her identity was transformed into Dorje Chenmo – only in this case the name was not altered (Jahoda 2006, 50 Abb. 8). It is worth adding that Christiane Kalantari refers to Jahoda’s work and points out the importance of Dorje Chenmo and her role in the subjugation and absorption of indigenous beliefs into the Buddhist doctrine (Kalantari 2010, 102).

Alternatively it might be presumed, that the deity was actually called Dorje Chenmo at some point but the name was changed back into the original one of the local protectress. Today, the small sculpture of the deity is located under the sculpture of Vairocana. Her cult goes far beyond simple veneration and she is attributed the highest status – even more important than Mahavairocana – by the present monastic community of Kargyu nuns. Consequently, the temple is nowadays referred to as Rangrigtse Temple.

LHATHOS AND TEMPLES: THE ARCHAIC AND THE ORTHODOX

According to the spatial principles of Buddhist iconography, the appointment of a deity as protector or protectress to a temple naturally resulted in his or her depiction above the entrance. Thereby the guardian was incorporated into the iconographic and ideological system of the temple.

The mode of integration into the visual program of a temple was only one of two major ways the cult of a guardian deity was “Buddhanised”. The second way was through the incorporation of a *lhatho* [*lha tho*], literally an abode for the deity, into Buddhist practices and “sacred topography”. Although the guardian may be presented within a temple’s visual program, it is actually the lhatho through which he or she manifests himself/herself – and temporarily in a most intense way through an oracle during a ceremony again related to the lhatho.

In regard to formal typology, the lhatho constitutes the most archaic among the many artifacts in Tibetan Buddhist art and architecture – and as such stands in sharp contrast to the precisely calculated and designed architecture of the Second Diffusion based on the geometric principles of the (Vajradhatu) mandala. The most common form of a lhatho has three major components. Firstly, a solid cubic base made of stone or mud brick, painted either white or red (or both) and occasionally decorated with symbols such as the sun and moon, faces or simple dotted patterns. Secondly, red painted horns or even complete skulls of blue sheep or ibex are placed on top of the cube. Thirdly, branches of juniper or some local broadleaf are attached by *khata* [*kha-btags*], a white ceremonial scarf, to a central post which is either a spear or a trident. A lhatho site is normally completed by a *darchen* [*dar chen*], a wooden pole with yak tail and textiles fixed to the top and / or an actual “life tree” nearby recognizable by



Fig. 3: The stupa field near Shey, the administrative and economic center of Ladakh during the period of the Second Diffusion (photo: E. Bertsch).

its red painted trunk⁸. A major aspect of the lhatho cult is the regular renewal of the structure during which the cube is repainted and the branches replaced by new ones. Such events usually take place once a year around *Losar* [*lo sar*], the Tibetan New Year. This annual complete redecoration results in a continuous re-shaping of the structures. In addition to a lack of datable art historical evidence such as paintings, this practice poses a serious problem for the historical evaluation of lhathos⁹.

However, there is little doubt that the archaic architectural concept of the lhatho is rooted in the pre-Buddhist cultural stratum of Shang Shung and the indigenous cults of pre-Buddhist Tibet. When the Buddhists established their monastic system, neither the stupa nor the temple were structures composed to “communicate” with the environmental factors which were so crucial for Himalayan societies. The temple architecture of the Second Diffusion originates from a geometric concept that is based on the

⁸ Occasionally *lhathos* have niches or even canburs (in Deskit, Hunder, Hemis and Gya). Sometimes *lhathos* are only defined through paintings on natural stones and in rare cases even trees only are considered as natural *lhathos* (in Kanji). It is beyond the scope of this article to go into detail of these specific cases, which have so far escaped scholarly attention.

⁹ The oldest date I have so far been given for a specific *lhatho* in Ladakh was for the *lhatho* of Kangri Labstan Dorje Bhawa [*Kang ri lha btsen rdo rje 'bar ba*] in Nyoma Mud in Upper Ladakh which was said to be 456 years old in 2014.



Fig. 4: Lhatho of Rangrig Dungma in the centre of Charang Village (photo: G. Kozicz).

centric arrangement of elements and it is therefore introverted by nature. The function of the stupa was the representation of Buddhist Law or Dharma, and as such, it was a fundamental element among the visual artistic vocabulary of orthodox Buddhism. It may therefore be assumed that when the Buddhists had to make their choice for how to enshrine and venerate the local divinities of non-Buddhist origin, they probably could not opt for the stupa. Instead, they decided to stick to the preexisting concept of the lhatho. The Buddhists incorporated the local spirits and their archaic abodes into their practices. The exact reconstruction of that process remains speculative since there is no historical data on lhathos during that period. However, the conceptual differences between the orthodox monastic architecture and the lhatho as well as the functional purpose of the local divinities clearly point to the hypothesis that a clear spatial and functional separation between the two systems existed. The introverted monastic structures were clustered in the lower levels of the valleys while the lhathos were strategically situated all over topography such as on rocks, above fields and near rivulets in order to communicate with – and thereby control – the natural environment.

At some point in Buddhist history of the region, the segregated attitude was abandoned. The following section of the article I discuss a number of lhathos of Dorje Chenmo and other local protectors that literally made their way into the orthodox Buddhist temple, both physically and ideologically.

THE LHATHOS OF DORJE CHENMO

The oldest surviving temples of Ladakh – formerly divided into Ladakh and Maryul – with their iconographic and artistic features widely intact are those of Alchi Choskor, Mangyu, Sumda Chun and Saspotse, commonly referred to as the Alchi Group of Monuments¹⁰. Similar to the temples of Nyarma and Tabo, the architectural plans of the Alchi Group temples reflect a symmetric pattern and a proportional canon based on the relationship between square and circle. The structure of their iconographic features resembles identical geometric and configurational principles.

While some damage has affected the entrance walls of some of the temples resulting in a loss of the paintings of these sections¹¹, some of the temples have preserved their original murals above the entrance. Such is the case with the three early temples of the Alchi Choskor, the Dukhang, the Sumtsek and the Manjusri Lhakhang. The three temples share the compositional and also stylistic features of the panel right above the entrance. These panels center on Mahakala flanked by two female deities displaying iconographic features recalling indigenous models of non-Buddhist origin. One of the female figures has been identified by Roger Goepfer as Sri Devi or Palden Lhamo. In a recent study on the Alchi Sumtsek, Chiara Bellini has drawn attention to the second one and identified her as an early form of Dorje Chenmo in a formative phase. Bellini points out the significance of the triadic composition within which Dorje Chenmo appears in equivalent position to Palden Lhamo [*dPal ldan lha mo*] of whom she is considered an emanation. Bellini further highlights the fact, that the appearance of the tutelary deity of Rinchen Zangpo creates a direct link between the Great Translator and Alchi (Bellini in print).

The same figure is already found inside the Dukhang which predates the Sumtsek. Unfortunately the Mahakala panel of the Manjusri Lhakhang has been partly repainted where Dorje Chenmo might have been shown. On the opposite side, however, a female figure has survived which is almost identical to the Dorje Chenmo of the Dukhang, the only (but significant) difference being the sword held in her right hand instead of the *vajra*, Dorje Chenmo's primary attribute.

Although these deities were certainly part of the standardized iconographic programs, their placement remained strictly confined to the panel exactly above the

¹⁰ There is considerable dispute on the exact dating of the temples. Inscriptional and paleographic evidence points to the earliest temples being founded in the second half of the 11th century (Denwood 2015, 159–66). This is supported by architectural evidence (Kozicz 2010, 31–41) and art historical evidence (Amy Heller and Chiara Bellini), while the later dating of 12th–13th century put forward by Roger Goepfer (1990, 159–75) is supported by Christian Luczanits (2003, 27).

¹¹ A complete loss of the entrance wall due to collapse occurred in the temple of Sumda Chun, while the murals of the two halls of Mangyu have widely lost their paintings of the entrance walls following water intrusion and repainting.



Fig. 5: Dorje Chenmo dressed in feather robe of the Dukhang Mahakala panel (photo: H. Poell).

entrance. Her subordinate position suggests no specific cult of Dorje Chenmo was actually conducted inside any of the temples. Remarkably, Christiane Kalantari noted a *thangka* painting of Dorje Chenmo in a wooden shrine fixed to one of the fluted columns of the hall. She further notes bundles of khata and the fact, that the *thangka* is shown to the public around the time of Losar, which is when special veneration of the guardians is conducted (Kalantari 2010, 101).

During my last visit to the temple in 2014, the column was heavily covered with different sets of scarves and banners. The banners above the box are all colorful while the bundle below the box is made of white banners and khata. The box itself had a locked glass window, behind which nine small-size banners could be seen. During an interview with a group of young monks from Likir Monastery it turned out that this was not only a special *thangka*, but that the whole set was actually considered as the *lhatho* of Dorje Chenmo. In regards to form and composition the box showed no similarity to the usual architectural concept of a *lhatho* – except for the khata, but it is by no means exclusively used for *lhathos*. Almost all components that normally constitute a *lhatho* were missing. Form and function had disintegrated in this particu-



Fig. 6: Manjusri Lhakhang Mahakala panel with another figure in feather dress (photo: H. Poell).

lar case. According to the monks, the deity is “always around” but not permanently residing inside the shrine. Although there is an image of her hidden behind the nine banners or face covers (*shalkyap*), she manifests herself inside the lhato only on one special occasion for five days. Only at the 5-day-long annual ceremony is the shrine opened and the nine face covers removed in a prescribed order. The first cover is put to the right, the next to the left and so on. Ahead of that, the ceremonial master has to undergo extraordinarily extensive ablutions ahead of the ceremony. Dorje Chenmo is then invoked exclusively for this ceremony. The ceremony itself is a silent rite and the only acoustic support is a drum performance called *lharna*. During these five days the daily Buddhist *pujas* continue and both liturgical systems exist contemporaneously inside the hall. For this period, lay people also frequently venerate the protectress and join the ceremony. It should be noted that there is no liturgical relationship between the depiction of a female deity dressed in feather robe identified as Dorje Chenmo and the deity enshrined in the “lhatho box”. There are no hints for any liturgical action addressing the deity in the Mahakala panel during the performance of the rites related to the lhatho. Neither the monks nor the lay community draw a connection between

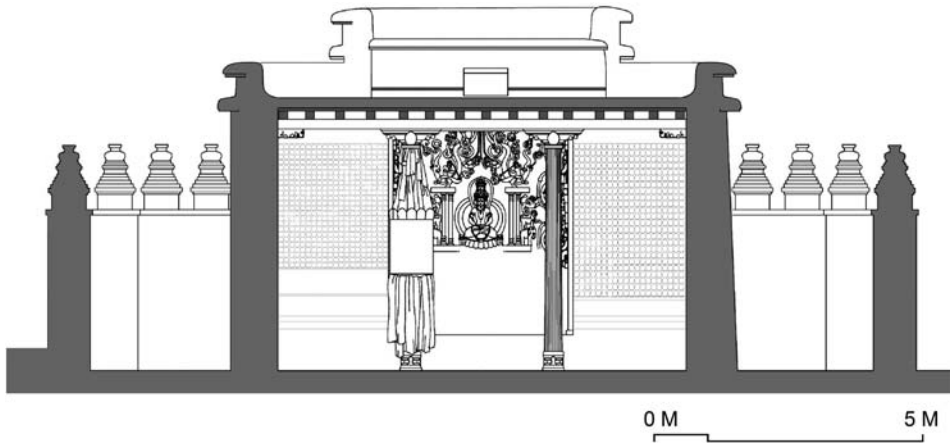


Fig. 7: Cross-section of the Dukhang with lhatho inside the box (photo: G. Kozicz).



Fig. 8: Lhatho of Dorje Chenmo attached to the fluted column of the Alchi Dukhang (photo: H. Poell).

the deity shown on the thangka and the deity of the Mahakala panel although it can be assumed that they both are rooted in an original, indigenous cult.

The iconographic programs of the major temples of the Alchi group share not only an architectural concept based on an assembly hall in front of an apse with a porch flanked by two tower-like chapels but also a main iconographic topic, the Vajradhatu-mandala cycle in sculpture centering on the four-headed Mahavairocana on the main wall of each cella. The most impressive of those Vajradhatumandalas is that of Sumda



Fig. 9: Image of Dorje Chenmo hidden behind face scarves (photo: N.C. Chunka).

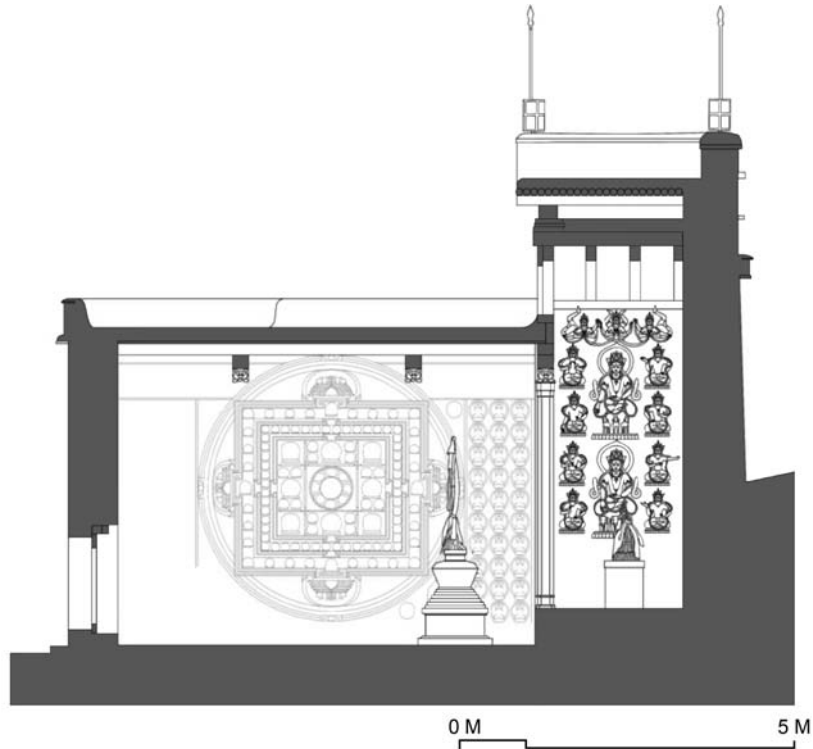


Fig. 10: Main section with the lhatho below Akshobhya (photo: G. Kozicz).

Chung, where all 37 deities are represented in sculpture and configured symmetrically on the three walls of the apse. It is a perfect system not only on an artistic, but also configurational level. It is therefore quite unexpected to find again a lhatho inside this temple – this time placed inside the apse just to the right below Mahavairocana. The lhatho is composed of the usual elements, and only the most archaic feature, the horns, are missing. On a white cube, a bundle of twigs is held together by several bands of textiles. The bundle is further decorated with ceremonial scarves and instead of a spear or trident a simple wooden stick is in its center. The lhatho, which has already been mentioned in passing by Nawang Tsering Shakspo, is again dedicated to Dorje Chenmo (see: Tsering Shakspo 2012, 163).

The lhatho does not fit into the over-all spatial system at all. Neither its form nor its position conforms to the formal and configurational principles of the original conception. According to oral tradition, Dorje Chenmo had originally resided in a lhatho outside the temple among a group of stupas along the path towards the temple's entrance. The reason for the transfer of the lhatho inside the innermost sanctum was the harmful activity undertaken by the deity against pregnant women and brides in particular. It



Fig. 11: Vajradhatumandala with the lhatho at the bottom to the right of Mahavairocana (photo: G. Kozicz).

has already been noted by de Nebesky-Wojkowitz that peaceful *dharmapalas* are of an instable nature and that they are apt to suddenly assume a ferocious disposition (see: Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, 5–6). In order to eliminate the danger, Dorje Chenmo was moved and literally put under the control of Mahavairocana and his retinue. The exact circumstances are not clearly known any more since – according to a local informant – the transfer took place “some time ago under the supervision of some Rinpoche”. Now situated to the right of the cosmic form of the Mahavairocana, Dorje Chenmo is at the same time also at the feet of Aksobhya, head of the Vajra Family and the most powerful among the four directional Buddhas of the mandala. In this context, mention must also be made of a stupa in the assembly area to the right of the apse. The stupa is of the Tibetan Enlightenment type and can scarcely be older than the 15th century. Its most remarkable feature which might be of relevance in the current context is the decoration of its upper section. Like with the lhatho, twigs and grass are placed on the *harmika* and the central post is decorated with a khata. Despite these formal similarities, no further clues for a closer relationship between the two objects on a liturgical level were put forward by my informant. Unlike most other lhathos, two ceremonies per year instead of only one are held for this Dorje Chenmo lhatho.



Fig. 12: The lhatho of Dorje Chenmo inside the Sumda Chun Vajradhatu Temple (photo: G. Kozicz).

MOVING LHATHOS

The first scholar to mention a lhatho installed inside an early Buddhist temple was August Hermann Francke who mentioned a lhatho inside the now almost completely dilapidated temple of Chigtan in Purig, Lower Ladakh. Francke noted the lhatho inside the hall which was dedicated to a 39-deity mandala in a sculpture placed on the facing wall of the temple (Francke 1914, 100¹²). Unfortunately, only the remains of one lateral wall of this monument, which can be dated to the beginning of the Second Diffusion, exists today. Another example of a lhatho inside a Buddhist shrine is found inside the so-called Lhatho Lhakhang of the Alchi Tsatsapuri Temple Compound. The main dedication of the temple which can be dated to the late 13th to 14th centuries is a Mahasamvara-Kalacakra Mandala in the center of its apse. Over the past generations, the temple has been owned and maintained by the local Tongspoon Family who use it as a family chapel and whose residence is directly behind the temple on the top of a rocky spur. Around the middle of the 20th century the family decided to transfer the family lhatho into the temple¹³. This specific lhatho was originally installed on a nearby mountain called Daltong close to the Stakspi La¹⁴. The deity, whose name is *Rungma* [*Rung ma*], was – and still is – expected to protect the highland summer pasture land. Since the ascent to the lhatho site for the annual ceremonies conducted around the Losar had become too dangerous and exhausting, the protector was moved from the grazing grounds into the temple and the transfer was carried out by monks. The fact, that the Lhatho Lhakhang was also known locally as Daltong Lhakhang, before the permanent enshrinement of Rungma, evidently suggests that the temple had already been in use as a place to evoke and seek contact with the family protector before the transfer took place. Although the sphere of action of the deity is a significant distance away and not directed towards human beings, the temple may not be visited by female members of the family¹⁵.

The occupation of the temple by the family protector and the final transfer of Rungma's lhatho into the chamber was probably stimulated by the ongoing blackening of the murals through dust and soot from the butter lamps which made the murals unrecognizable. Illegibility has caused a subsequent loss of knowledge of the original

¹² As can be seen in a related photograph (101, Plate XLII b) there was another *lhatho* placed directly on the front wall above the entrance.

¹³ Personal communication with the grandfather of the family, August 2012.

¹⁴ The Stakspi La or Ibex Pass, connects the Alchi Valley and Sumda Chung and is among the steepest paths in the area. The Tongspoon family lhatho was accessed via that route. Source: Tsering Dolka, Alchi.

¹⁵ There are a number of sites where women are forbidden to access lhathos. In some cases, such a rule is only temporary (such as during pregnancy), sometimes it is permanent (such as at Nyoma-Mud where a red stone marks the line beyond which women are not allowed).



Fig. 13: Rungma Lhato in the centre of the Lhatho Lhakhang / Daltong Lhakhang (photo: G. Kozicz).

iconographic content. Rungma still holds his position as a protector of the pasture land and distance to it has had no negative impact on his powers.

The actual ceremony through which the lhatho is annually renewed takes place on the first new moon after Losar. This act replaces a lack of the hall's function after the moment when the temple could not fulfill its original liturgical function any more due to the loss or illegibility of the original murals. Through attaching the insignia of the lhatho onto the post or column in front of the apse – the post being slightly located aside the main axis and thereby not interrupting the visual axis between Kalacakra and Aksobhya on the facing wall – the lhatho is literally placed in the center of the chamber. Through the installation of the lhatho on the central post this temple was actually transformed into a protector's chapel.

Apparently, the installation of lhathos inside temples was not a phenomenon confined to Dorje Chenmo. A significant difference to the Rungma Lhatho discussed above is the central position of that guardian within the over-all spatial, iconographic and liturgical context. Inside early Alchi temples the lhathos of Dorje Chenmo remain in a subordinate position within the original overall concept.

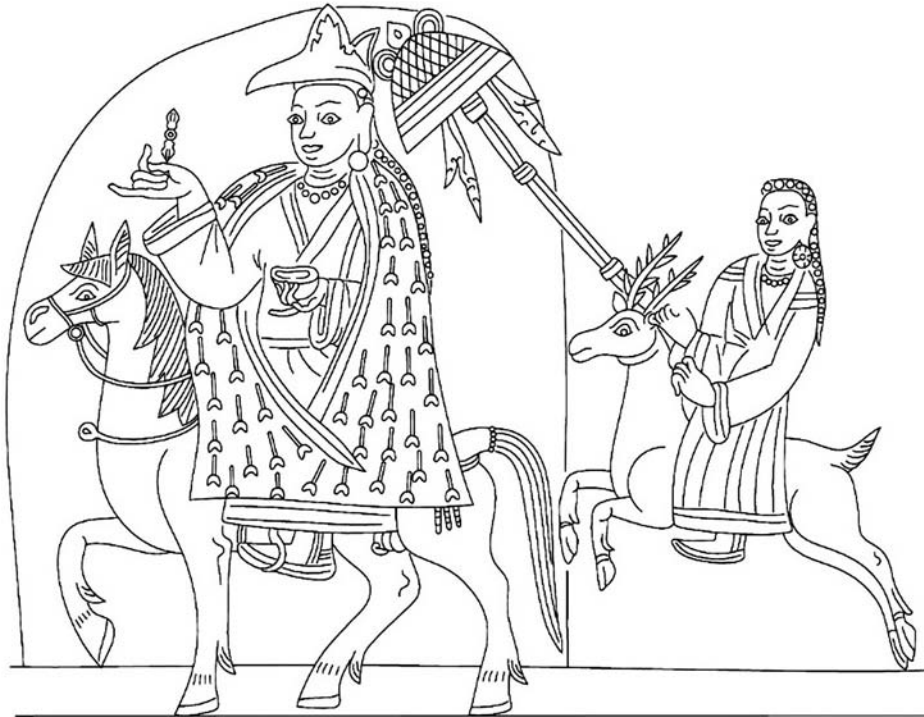


Fig. 14: Dorje Chenmo inside the Lhakang Soma of Alchi (G. Kozicz).

CONCLUSIONS

The relevance of the identification of a lhatho system dedicated to Dorje Chenmo inside the Alchi temples is manifold. First of all, her cult apparently never faded away even after the advance of Central Tibetan Buddhist schools into Ladakh. Inside the Lhakang Soma of Alchi which reflects the influence of the Drigung Order, she was even separated from the Mahakala panel. She became a deity in her own right and the size of her representation was significantly enlarged. Her depiction inside the Lhakang Soma is very similar to the way she is shown inside the Kawaling Stupa of Nyoma in Upper-Ladakh, another site that can be attributed to the activities of the Drigung Order and roughly dates to the 14th century. By that time her iconography apparently had become standardized.

It may also be noted that her cult continued at the sites of the Alchi Group of Monuments although these temples were subsequently passed over to different orders. However, at that point of religious history (the 13th/14th centuries) the function of Dorje Chenmo as a tool to overcome indigenous beliefs ceased to be an issue and

by that time her iconography had also been standardized. The Alchi Compound is nowadays administered by the Gelugpa monastery of Likir while Sumda Chun belongs to the Drukpa monastery of Hemis.

In a wider context, the presence of the tutelary deity of Rinchen Zangpo predating the final iconographic standardization within the early temples of the Second Diffusion suggests that Dorje Chenmo was instrumental in assisting the firm establishment of Buddhism all over the region. The presence of her lhathos adds weight to the hypothesis that she was strategically used to absorb local protectors and to merge the earlier cultural stratum with her iconography and religious concept. Unfortunately, in this respect, Francke did not collect any further information about the lhatho inside the Chigtan Temple and the enshrined guardian. The assumption that it might have been Dorje Chenmo finds support by a group of lhathos installed in various houses of the village of Kanji all of which enshrine a male deity called “Jo” Dorje Chenmo. Kanji is located in a side valley of the Chigtan-Bodkarbu Valley. Now, today there is no trace of any early temple left inside Kanji Village, but further up in the interior of minor side valley beyond Kanji – just an hour walk away – there is the rebuilt temple of Lachutse. The extraordinary quality of the craftsmanship of carvings and the stylistic feature of the components of the wooden structure (pillars, capitals, door frame, etc.) which were re-used for the reconstruction of the collapsed temple point to the original structure being dated to around AD 1100 latest. According to oral tradition, the Lachutse Temple was one of three old temples around Kanji¹⁶. Apparently, Jo Dorje Chenmo again originates from the amalgamation of the protectress of Rinchen Zangpo with a, this time male, local guardian. The hypothesis of the female origin of the protector finds support from the fact, that the guardian’s name retained the female form of Chen-“mo”.

It appears that the major religious sites of the Buddhist Kingdom of Guge and Purang, and probably even beyond, came under one protective umbrella that spanned across the dominion at a scale which has not yet been realized. It appears that a two-fold strategy was applied by Buddhist propaganda. First, was the inclusion of indigenous deities into the Buddhist pantheon and the iconographic concepts of temples in a subordinate position. In addition to the inclusion into the orthodox system and art, which was perceived in the monastic context, the lhatho was also “buddhanized”. However, the lhatho was not adapted to Buddhist visual language and retained its original non-orthodox, archaic conception. The lhatho was institutionalized to assert the control of Buddhism over the natural environment and to secure the position of Buddhism outside the monastic context. While the cult of the local protectors within

¹⁶ I am most grateful to Edoardo Ferrari for providing this important information. A co-authored publication of the various spatio-symbolic and socio-cultural layers of the Kanji valley is in preparation. A summary of several features of the village is also published in Ferrari 2015, 73–77.

the iconographic programs of temples was absorbed into the wider pantheon and lost its indigenous significance, the importance of the manifestations inside the various lhathos constantly grew. As a result, lhathos have been even transferred into temples. At its extreme, the cult of the lhatho and the enshrined local protector temporarily even appropriated orthodox religious space – as is documented from the Alchi Dukhang. In a way, the archaic form infiltrated the orthodox system. The case of the Rangrigtse Temple near Charang provides evidence that the cult of the original protector not only survived through the superimposition by Dorje Chenmo, but even regained control over the orthodox system on a local level.

Further research into the religious history of lhathos will certainly yield new data to complete previous research and the present architectural discussion. Due to the formal principles of lhathos and their nature – which includes the absence of datable compositional or decorative elements – the architectural documentation provides little definitive information on the developments that finally led to her physical manifestations inside the Alchi temples. However, her lhathos inside the temples provide ample evidence for the perpetual presence of her cult even today though the mode of representation and her veneration have completely changed.

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