An Archaeological Account of Ten Ancient Painted Chortens in Ladakh and Zanskar

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In memory of André Alexander, his inspiring work and wonderful achievements.

Introduction

The most comprehensive study of the stupa in Ladakh remains that of Tucci published in *Indo-Tibetica I* (1932). In this book dealing with Tibet and surrounding Himalayan regions, the famous Italian Tibetologist translates various Tibetan texts dealing with the chorten (*mchod rten*), the Tibetan equivalent to the Sanskrit *stūpa*, and presents the material gathered during his expeditions, mainly consisting of clay tablets (*tsha tsha*). Since then only three publications dedicated to the stupa architecture of Ladakh have been published. Pieper (1980) makes an inventory of various buildings types of chortens in the Indus valley, between Lamayuru (*bLa ma g.yu ru*) and Hemis (*He mis*), and shows that there is a considerable variety in their architecture. Mention is made of the ‘signal value’ of some chortens but there is no comment about their origin or possible dating. In *Stupa and its Technology: a Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective* Dorjee (1996) describes important chortens between Hemis and Spituk (*dPe thub*). According to him they fall into two categories: late and early stupas. The architecture of the late stupas corresponds to the eight types of chortens acknowledged by the Tibetan tradition since the first quarter of the 14th century. Finally, the study of Ladakhi chortens by Kath Howard (1995) is devoted to monuments belonging to the 11–15th centuries. The author classifies them into five types: stupas associated with Rinchen Zangpo (*Rin chen bzang po*), Lotsawa (*lo tsa ba*), Lhabap (*lha bab*), Gomang (*sgo mang*) stupas and a fifth miscellaneous type. The chortens are dated according to their traditional asso-

1 All sites presented in this paper were documented by Devers in 2009, 2010 and 2011, with the exception of the chortens in Nang which were first documented by Vernier in 2003. This fieldwork was funded by the Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l’Asie Orientale (UMR8153: CNRS / EPHE / Paris Diderot-Paris 7 / Collège de France) in 2009, and by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient in 2010 and 2011. All plans and elevations are by Vernier.
ciation with Rinchen Zangpo or their link with other remains such as temples. Since 2005 a ‘Stupa Project’ aiming at documenting and categorizing architectural concepts related to the development of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Ladakh has been undertaken by Kozicz (2010b).

At the present state of research, no absolute dating can be provided for any of the ancient chortens of Ladakh. The task is difficult because the monuments are very often in an advanced state of decay due to the nature of the materials used for their construction and also because they are frequently rebuilt or whitewashed.

The idea for this article originated in the summer of 2010 when one of the present authors witnessed the reconstruction of a painted chorten in Zangla (bZang la) in Zangskar (Zangs dkar), as will be discussed below. In terms of conservation this action is a major source of concern since a similar reshaping is intended for the neighbouring chorten of Malakartse Khar (Ma lag mkar rtse mkhar), whose artistic and important historical value has been acknowledged by experts along with similar monuments in Nyarma (Nyṇar ma), Basgo (Bab sgo), Alchi (A lci), Sumda Chung (gSum mda’ chung), Mangyu (Mang rgyu), Lamayuru, Karsha (dKar sha) and Ichar (gYi char, I mTsar).2 If not properly restored, these treasures of Ladakhi religious architecture are threatened, as are other unknown or little-known chortens. The authors wish to draw the attention of locals and scholars to ten unknown or little-known monuments so that they can be appropriately preserved and studied in the future. In their capacity as archaeologists, the authors choose to stay out of art-historical debates, including questions about dating, and present the chortens according to their architecture.

As duly noted by Tucci (1988a:15), Tibetan architects divide “[…] the building into two different parts: the basis or throne and the stupa as such, in the same way that is usually done for a statue […].” Accordingly, the chortens presented below are classified under three types differentiated by the nature of the