The Chorten (mChod rten) with the Secret Chamber near Nyarma

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In Ladakh there are no surviving architectural structures that can be securely dated to a period earlier than the final decades of the first millennium CE, when the rapid spread of Buddhism resulted in the construction of a large number of religious monuments all over the Western Himalayan region. The regional centre, from which this second Diffusion (Phyi dar) of the Buddhist faith pervaded the social and political entities of the region was the monastic complex of Nyarma (Nyar ma) in the Indus valley south of Leh. This part of today’s Ladakh, by that time known as Mar yul, had come under control of the Western Tibetan kingdom of Guge and Purang by the middle of the 10th century. The foundation of Nyarma is ascribed to Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055 CE), the ‘Great Translator’ (Lotsawa—lo tsa ba) who brought numerous Buddhist scriptures back to the region from Kashmir.1 The fact that the kings of Guge and Purang provided the funds for the erection of their second largest religious centre in the very northern border region of their empire is noteworthy and may be explained by the fertility and prosperity of that part of the Indus Valley. Nyarma apparently became the key-site for the sustainable spread of Buddhism in Ladakh and influenced neighbouring Buddhist communities.2 And of course it influenced the religious activities of noble monks from the Alchi (A lci) area, whose affiliations with Nyarma has been attested by Philip Denwood through textual evidence documented in the famous, and today still mainly intact, temples of the Alchi compound.3 The early ‘Golden Decades’ were probably followed by a loss of royal patronage and financial support causing a continuous decline. The monastery of Nyarma was eventually abandoned, and the remaining temple ruins and stupas (chortens—mchod rten) are in poor condition today.

1 Rinchen Zangpo has been credited with the translation of a large number of tantric texts as well the planning of no less than 108 temples in the western Himalayan kingdom. So far Nyarma is the only Rinchen Zangpo foundation in Ladakh identified among the list of 108 on secure textual grounds. See Vitali (1999:24).
2 For a discussion of the political history of Ladakh and the difficulties relating to the definition of regional and sub-regional borders see the contribution in this volume by Neil Howard.
3 See Denwood’s translation in Snellgrove and Skorupski (1977:30, 45, 48).
This essay focuses on one such structure which I describe—for reasons that will be explained—as the ‘Chorten with the Secret Chamber’ (CSC). After years of obvious neglect and vandalism, this chorten is not far from the point of collapse, and it is essential to study it closely while this is still possible. The essay analyses its apparently unique architectural structure, together with the iconography of its interior, and compares it with roughly contemporary chortens from elsewhere on the Nyarma site and in the monastic complex of Alchi.

The Setting

Nyarma lies in the very heartland of Ladakh where the Indus valley is broad-est. The site of the monastery seems to have been carefully chosen to the east of the Indus on a flat but slightly elevated, barren part of the valley, perhaps in order to save agricultural land. Its topographical situation may be described as in a ‘bay’, as the flanking eastern hills turn towards the Indus to the south and north of the monastery. On the rocky spur to the north there is an ancient castle,4 and a small hermitage was built on the eastern hill. The latter is still named Ensa (dBen sa—‘hermitage’) and according to local tradition it was used as a place for retreat by the Lotsawa himself.

Soon after the monastery’s foundation, several temples and a great number of stupas were built beyond the borders of the main compound,5 including to the north of the castle where another desert field extends for about a kilometre. The structures of this northern section included two temples, three rows of 108 stupas and several smaller clusters of stupas.6

In the 1970s David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski (1977:19) pointed out that ‘the temples are just empty shells today’. All the roofs of the temples were removed long ago and their decorations have faded away during the centuries.

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5 It is noteworthy that additional structures were erected outside the compound despite the enormous size of the enclosed area, thereby leaving a large portion free from architectural structures for purposes that are so far unidentified. The original setting inside the enclosure consisted of four temples only, two of which formed a joint spatial unit. See Kozicz (2010:34–39).
6 Among the ruins in the very centre of the field two neighbouring ruins of square floor plan on a shared platform or basis deserve a separate note. Both of the chambers face west and their remaining walls are made of two layers, one internal and one external. As the entrances were originally framed by colour painted frames created of plaster instead of the wooden frames of temple architecture, the hypothesis can be put forward that these are the ruins of comparatively large stupas.