The Dating of the Sumtsek Temple at Alchi

Philip Denwood

In 1980 I published most of the mural inscriptions in the Dukhang (’Du khang) and Sumtsek (gSum brtsegs) temples at Alchi (A lchi), Ladakh, and numbered them 1–12 (Denwood 1980:152). I concluded that the oldest temple on the site, the Dukhang, was founded in the early to mid-11th century. I further proposed, mainly on grounds of the palaeography, style and authorship of its inscriptions, that the three-storey Sumtsek temple alongside the Dukhang was founded (by Tshul khrims ’od) in the last third of the 11th century (Denwood 1980:152).

Further important inscriptions from the top storey of the Sumtsek were subsequently published by Roger Goepper with Jaroslav Poncar (Figure 6.1) (Goepper (1996a:212; 216–7). See also Goepper 1990:159–176). The Sumtsek’s founder Tshul khrims ’od is mentioned in one of these (but see below), alongside paintings of a lineage of Kagyupa (bKa’ brgyud pa) lamas, the last of whom is ’Jig rten mgon po, the founder of the Drigungpa (’Bri gung pa) order (Figure 6.2). Along with art-historical arguments, this led Goepper to propose that the Sumtsek’s founder “must have been active around the end of the twelfth to the beginning of the thirteenth century”; thus over a hundred

**Figure 6.1** Murals on the top storey of the Sumtsek temple, with members of a Kagyupa lineage in the left-hand panel, and rows of monks on the right-hand panel. Photo: Lionel Fournier.
years later than my dating. Goepper has continued to promote this hypothesis despite counter-arguments from, among others, Heather Stoddard and Lionel Fournier (Stoddard 2003:167; Segraves 2001).

I feel it is worth restating and amplifying my own hypothesis in view of Goepper’s evidence and arguments.

There are several places in the Sumtsek where inscriptions appear to have been obliterated (Fig. 6.3) and, in some cases, re-inscribed. Inscription 6, to the proper right of the statue of Maitreya, is written in an dbu med style like that of Inscription 2 in the Dukhang by the same author (a point to which I shall return below). The corresponding panel to Maitreya’s proper left has been overwritten in dbu can script and rather uneven lines in the reign of Tashi Namgyal (bKra shis rnam rgyal) in the 16th century (Inscription 10: Figure 6.4) (Denwood 1980:140–41; 149). There could presumably be two reasons (not