The Wood Carvings of Lachuse. A Hidden Jewel of Early Mediaeval Ladakhi Art

Heinrich Poell

Introduction; The Setting

The small village temple of Lachuse (Figure 8.1)—located in a remote corner of Western Ladakh— is a stone building with a single square room without windows, accessed through a door in the front wall; light is admitted through an opening in the roof. The temple is built into a steep slope slightly above the village, so that at the back of the building one can step directly onto the roof. This is a somewhat unusual setting for an early temple, all the more remarkable as there is plenty of level ground in and around the village. Originally the building had a recessed vestibule, but this is now largely obscured by the clumsy and unnatural addition of a monks’ house that has been built in front of the temple.

At first sight the building appears to be in a good state, but closer inspection shows extensive repairs to all exterior walls, and added masonry for the support of the façade and the side walls. The sagging front beam supporting the roof is broken and rests now on the monks’ house built into the main façade. The masonry of the monks’ house and of the walls buttressing the original construction is of much lower quality than the original walls.

On the inside (Figure 8.2) the walls are covered with modern ‘Thousand Buddha’ murals, interrupted on the back by a niche with two clay stupas; this is obviously a later addition to the original plan. The ceiling has undergone extensive renovations and alterations; the main beams and the rafters are now of rather irregular shapes and sizes, with much new material between reused old wood.

Within this largely despoiled setting, wood art of exceptional quality and art historical significance has been preserved. The entrance to the temple has

---

1 Lachuse lies about two hours’ walk south–west from Kanji, the next major village, in a side valley off the ancient trade route from Lamayuru over the Kanji La (pass) to Ringdom in Zangskar.

2 The inside dimensions of the temple are approx. 6.2 × 5.0 m; the original vestibule would have measured about 4.8 × 2.1 m. Cf. the ground floor plan in Figure 8.1; the original walls of the building are shown in grey.
Figure 8.1  Lachuse temple, view from the South–East and floor plan (© John Harrison/ Achi Association).