Nyar ma monastery lies in the Indus Valley south of Khrig rtse monastery in Ladakh, India. According to the tradition it was founded by Rin chen bZang po (958–1055), and it was probably his largest and most important foundation in this region (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: 19; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 91).

Due to the total removal of the individual temples’ roofs in the past, the compound has been completely neglected and thus remained largely unstudied by scholars of Himalayan art. Apart from a few traces of paint and fragments of mandoras, all the artistic decorations, such as murals and sculptures, have been destroyed by wind and rain. Despite the compound’s dilapidated condition, the remaining walls of the five temples, about a dozen mchod rten and the fragments of the former compound wall manage to give an impressive insight into the former sacred area (Figs. 1, 2).

These provide precious sources of information for the study of ancient Buddhist architecture in the western Himalayas. It is noteworthy that the buildings in Nyar ma were erected with an extraordinary precision. This has facilitated the accurate measurement of the extant architectural elements and the conceptual analysis of the layout and geometric patterns. This article concentrates on two buildings within the compound:

1. The Nyar ma Main Temple (NMT), a large complex consisting of many parts, situated in the northwest, which appears to be the most important temple.

2. The Mchod rten Temple (CT), situated in the southern part of the walled compound, contains segments of a mchod rten inside its cella area.

By utilising these two monuments as examples, the present article will study the geometry of the architectural forms and reconstruct the process of their architectural design in order to examine the transformation of the ideal Buddhist conceptualisation of space, the maṇḍala, into an architectural plan.
General view of Nyar ma

Map of the former Chos 'khor