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The Uncommon History of Markha *Chorten*, Ladakh

By Martin Vernier¹ and Quentin Devers²

he Markha Valley is located in Ladakh, south of Leh, and is parallel to the Indus. The valley has a rich architectural heritage dating mainly from the 10th century onwards. The valley's eponymous village, the most important in size, bears important archaeological remains. At the foot of the former palace is a group of *chortens*, among which one has a collapsed wall (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Through it, one can appreciate the interior of the *chorten*. It consists in a room decorated by murals, in the middle of which is placed a finely carved column³. The general description of this *chorten*, of its surroundings, as well as an analysis of its woodcarvings have already been covered in previous publications⁴. The purpose of the present paper is to provide a more detailed account of the *chorten*'s murals and of the inscriptions written on them.

Quick Background

The original entrance of the *chorten* is on its northern wall (Fig. 3). Whereas the level of the ground must initially have been roughly the same on all four sides of the *chortens*, it is now two meters higher on its northern side than on its southern one. The *chorten* has indeed been used as a terracing feature during an important landscaping of the surroundings. As a result, the door is now half buried. Nowadays, the regular entrance to the room is through its missing wall, on the southern side. According to villagers it collapsed about eighty years ago.

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³ This *chorten* was first surveyed by Martin Vernier in 2004, and further again in subsequent years. Quentin Devers completed its recording in 2009.

⁴ Devers et Vernier 2011 ; Vernier et Devers 2012.

The Paintings

The murals have undergone severe damage. Indeed, half of them are missing following the collapse of the back wall, and most of the faces have been degraded. Some figures have clear impacts only on their eyes, showing a meticulous and determined work of either vandalism or deconsecration⁵. This makes the identification of the murals a difficult task (Fig. 5): the back wall is usually the key commanding the iconographic program without which the reading of the other walls can become uncertain.

Of the three remaining walls, only the entrance one is fully preserved (Fig. 4). The right and left walls indeed miss half of their original murals. The whole composition is painted on a dark blue background (Fig. 7). Top and bottom friezes made of a succession of pink, white, red and dark stripes frame the murals. In the two remaining corners, the murals are delineated vertically with a series of stacked "V"s painted in white, red and blue, thus imitating large temples pillar hangings, *kapan* (*ka 'phan*). All three walls are organised in two horizontal registers. The sidewalls had a central figure occupying their entire height, of which only fragments of halos and lotus seats are left.

On the right wall, four large and two smaller figures are still visible (Fig. 6). Directly on the side of the lost central figure, two monks are sitting cross-legged on a lotus pedestal (Fig. 4 : 1, 2). The upper monk (Fig. 4: 1) holds a *kapāla* in one hand, and a (vertical) *vajra* in front of his heart in the other, identifying him as Padmasambhava (Gu ru rin po che). On their left side are two tantric deities. The upper one (Fig. 4: 3) is Chakrasaṃvara ('Khor lo bde mchog), standing in the *ālīḍha* posture, adorned with bones ornaments and wearing a crown with the five skulls. He holds a *vajra* and a bell, and is engaged in a sexual union (*yab yum*) with Vajravārāhī (rDo rje phag mo), his red consort. Below (Fig. 4: 4) is a black four-armed Mahākāla (Ma hā kā la). His two outer hands hold a trident and a sword, while the two inner hands are joined on the chest but too damaged to identify their *mudrās*.

The entrance wall is the best preserved (Fig. 7). Above the door (Fig. 4: 9), is a second four-armed Mahākāla, trampling on a human body. The protector (*dharmapāla*) holds the traditional attributes (sword, trident, *kapāla*). On its right side (Fig. 4: 8) we can see a red deity on the upper register, a probable red Vajrayoginī (rDo rje rnal

⁵ The hypothesis of deconsecration was brought to our attention by Christian Luczanits when we showed him pictures of the *chorten* at the summer of 2010. Indeed, the precision with which the faces and in some cases only the eyes of the figures were taken off tends to support this hypothesis.

'byor ma) with the skull cup and a chopper in the raised right hand. On the other side of the four-armed Mahākāla (Fig. 4: 9) is Simhaṃukhā (Seng ge gdong ma ; Fig. 4: 10). Below it Śrī Devī (dPal ldan lha mo; Fig. 4: 12) is depicted mounted on her mule. The part of the wall on the left of the door bears a scene (Fig. 4: 7) on its lower register and two deities on the upper. The deity on the left (Fig. 4: 5) is quite damaged but can still be identified as Ṣaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara (sPyan ras gzigs phyag bzhi pa), a four-armed form of Avalokiteśvara (sPyan ras gzigs). Two smaller deities are on each side of his head (Fig. 4: 5a, 5b). Next on the right (Fig. 4: 6) is a representation of Ma-chig Labdron (Ma gcig lab sgron), the tantric *yoginī* connected with the *chöd* (*gcod*) practice. Of white colour, she is depicted dancing (*ardhaparyāṅka*) on a lotus flower with the *damaru* in one hand and the *kangling* (*rkang gling*) in the other. The scene on the lower register (Fig. 4: 7) will be discussed further below.

The part of the wall on the right side of the door when facing it bears the representations of four deities. The upper left one (Fig. 4: 13) misses most of her upper body, making her immediate identification difficult. She stands on a lotus, her body seems red, and she holds a mirror in her right hand. The inscription below her (Fig. 4 and Fig. 14 :E) says "homage/hail to Abchi" ("*ab ci la na mo*"): although the spelling can vary, and although the name is incomplete, this figure is probably the representation of Achi Chokyi Dolma (A ci Chos kyi sgröl ma), the famous Drigung Kagyud ('Bri kung bka' brgyud) protectress. On her left (Fig. 4: 15) is the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī ('Jam dpal dbyangs) with his attributes, a sword and a book, placed on lotus flowers. Two smaller bodhisattva are on either side of his head (Fig. 4: 15a, 15b). On the left in the lower register (Fig. 4: 16) is a depiction of Vajravīṇāsarasvatī, a form of the goddess Sarasvatī of the Hindu pantheon, who in Tibetan Buddhism is linked to Mañjuśrī under the name of Yangchenma (dByangs can ma). Seated cross-legged, she is playing the lute (*vīṇā*). Between her and the deity above is another small figure that we were not able to identify (Fig. 4: 14), and on her left is an unidentified blue protector standing in *ālīḍha* posture (Fig. 4: 17; Fig. 8). He holds a *vajra* in both his crossed hands (*vajrahūmkāra mudrā*). Though quite damaged, it seems that his head is crowned with five skulls and that he is engaged in a sexual union with a red partner, of which only hands can be perceived. That blue protector could be identified as Cakrasaṃvara, and its partner as Vajravārāhī.

The left wall is a bit better preserved than the right one and seems to be designed similarly (Fig. 9). Indeed, the closer half to the entrance bears four figures that seem to encircle a central one. On the upper register, the figure on the left (Fig. 4: 18; Fig. 10) is an Avalokiteśvara standing in the *samāpāda* posture, with his hands in *varada*

mudrā. On the right, similar to that on the entrance wall, is Śaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara (Fig. 4: 19), a four-armed form of Avalokiteśvara. His lotus pedestal is the only one with petals turned upwards. In the absence of much of the original murals it is not clear if this detail has any particular meaning⁶. He is also the only figure with a sun disc painted around his head emerging from the halo, indicating that it is probably the main image of the wall. On either side of his head are two smaller cross-legged red figures in meditation (Fig. 4: 19a, 19b), indicating that they represent Buddha Amitābha ('Od dpag med)⁷.

On the left of the lower register, a very damaged blue character (Fig. 4: 20) stands in *pratyālīḍha*, trampling on two human corpses and holding a stick or a sword in his right hand. What looks like a tiger skin is tied around his hips, and a small portion of apparently orange hair is also visible. He might be identified as a black Hayagrīva (rTa mgrin). On his left (Fig. 4: 21) is a white Tārā (sGrol dkar) seated in the *lalitāsana* posture. She holds a lotus flower on her left and with her hands in *varada mudrā*, two of her attributes. A smaller cross-legged character is located between her and the other larger figure on her right but has not been identified (Fig. 4: 21a). The main central figure is missing, as mentioned above.

Small figures aligned on the bottom of the wall on the right-most end are barely visible (Fig. 4: 24, 25). The fragment of a red Amitābha Buddha is still recognizable among cracks of the faded coat (Fig. 4: 23). On the upper register of the damaged right part of the wall (Fig. 4: 22; Fig. 11), one can recognize the Śākyamuni Buddha in *dharmacakra mudrā* seated cross-legged on a lotus inserted in an architectural environment surrounded by trees. At his feet is a flying monk, holding a ceremonial scarf in an offering gesture. The other remaining murals at the lower right end of the wall are too damaged

⁶ Certain traditions assert that the lotus should point upward when the moon disc is placed on top of the solar disc, both forming a circular platform on which stands or sits the deity. Conversely, when the solar disc is on top, then the lotus petals should point downwards. Other traditions link the orientation of the petals to the type of representation: upward-facing for peaceful deities and downwards for wrathful ones. None of these interpretations apply to the paintings in the Markha *chorten*.

⁷ Christian Luczanits rightly pointed to us that both Avalokiteshvara in this upper register lack their crown figure, which is also the case for the Tārā below. As a whole one may take this part as a lotus family side. In addition, there is a dark blue wrathful image against a halo of flames, likely one of the secondary figures around the main images since two more are seen at the bottom. (private communication, 28 May 2011). We are also indebted to him for the identification of the sub-form of Avalokiteśvara, Śaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara.

to discern anything except that two merged flaming halos of some protectors are still visible⁸.

Let us now turn to the scene on the lower register of the entrance wall (Fig. 4: 7; Fig. 12; Fig. 13). It is organised in three stacked registers. On the upper level, two monks larger than the other characters are seated on carpets, holding both a white bowl in their right hand. They wear the typical fan-shaped red hat of the *kagyud* sect. The largest monk is sitting under a canopy. These two central figures are surrounded by standing servant monks. On their left, and slightly lower, two other smaller monks are seated on carpets as well.

On the left is a curious square structure topped by five white steps. Two blue vase-shaped objects are on each side of the second step, while on the last there are three objects in front of orange flames. This structure could be a fire offering altar, or, which would be quite unusual, a funeral pyre. In both cases, the whole scene is obviously linked with the aim of the *chorten's* consecration. As we will see, two of the inscriptions state that the *chorten* was dedicated to the memory of a high lama, while five others refer to a death-anniversary memorial ceremony. These would fit well with both hypotheses mentioned above – though funeral pyre scenes are, so far, known to be depicted only for the life of Buddha. The second register of the scene shows two groups of people sitting on each side of a central set of objects that include a large butter lamp. The group on the right consists of religious figures, while on the left there are only lay people. On the lowermost level, a group of women standing on carpets can be seen on the left (Fig. 13). They wear some type of *peyrag* (*pad rag* or *pad sbrags*) topped with turquoises, and are supervised by two male figures wearing turbans, white baggy trousers, tall black boots, and long tunics crossed on the torso and closed by a colourful belt. One at least has a black beard. On the right of this group are large pots of various shapes and colours, around which are servants dressed in a similar way. Butter dots (*yar*) are clearly visible on the edges of the pots, which could thus be taken as beer (*chang*) containers. Further right, seated on two carpets, is a group of two men wearing white turbans with red toupees, and two or three women. The latter are too damaged to be described with accuracy. At the

⁸ As a guideline for this portion of the wall, the reader may find helpful the comments of Christian Luczanits. For him this side actually represents Buddha Amitāyus or Amitābha in the western paradise Sukhāvatī. This explains the lotus bond underneath the throne and the additional Buddhas in their own palaces around. He may have had Padmasambhava at his side, but unfortunately he cannot be recognized. Possibly he was even the main image, but the tiny fragments preserved are rather pointing towards a seated Buddha, as the lotus pond from which the seat of the main image seems to indicate (private communication, 28 May 2011).

right end three servants are leading horses with riders, but this part of the paintings is too damaged to be described with accuracy (*Fig. 13*).

Similar scenes can be seen in many Ladakhi temples, and show a great deal of non-religious information through costumes, tableware, architecture and other such local elements. These scenes are already depicted in old temples like in Alchi or Mangyu, where they show clear Central Asian influences in the costumes and headgears. Artists kept representing them up to king Sengge Namgyal's times (Seng ge rnam rgyal), as can be seen in the Namgyal Tsemo temple (rNam rgyal rtse mo) above Leh⁹. The scene in Markha shows similarities with other banquet scenes that can be seen in Hundar at the Gyalwa Chamba Dukhang (rGyal ba byams pa 'du khang) or in Basgo at the Maitreya temple. The latter was founded by king Tsewang Namgyal (Tshe dbang rnam rgyal; last quarter of the 16th century), the grand son of Drakbumde (Grags pa 'bum lde)¹⁰. Costumes, pots, trees and cloud designs are very close to those depicted in the drinking scene in Hundar, which can be dated to the early 16th century through an inscription asserting that Tashi Namgyal (bKra shis rnam rgyal; first half of the 16th century) was ruling during its construction¹¹. Based on their overall style and finishing, we consider the murals in Markha *chorten* to be slightly earlier than those in Basgo and Hundar, and as such we suggest the late 15th or early 16th century for their execution¹².

The Inscriptions

Twelve painted inscriptions are still visible on the walls, out of which seven are still partially readable (*Fig. 14*). The inscriptions are contiguous to the deities painted on the walls. All are written in black *dbu chen* script within inserts. They can be divided in two groups. Some (Inscriptions B, G, H, K and L) are written on a white background and are integrated in the design of the space of the murals (*Fig. 15*). They are decayed and unfortunately none of them is readable anymore. The other inscriptions, the second set (Inscriptions A, C, D,

⁹ Such headdresses with turbans were still in use as late as the 1820's as reported by Moorcroft and Trebeck when they met with the "young Raja" of Leh, son of Tsepel Tondup Namgyal (*ts'e dpal don grub rnam rgyal*), who was wearing a "white turban on his head, with a small jewel in front" (Moorcroft et Trebeck 1841, p. 395).

¹⁰ Snellgrove et Skorupski 1977, p. 85.

¹¹ Vohra 1985, p. 14-15.

¹² Given the scarcity of detailed studies of temples from this period in Ladakh, we warmly encourage more competent art historians to undertake a closer study of these murals in order to confirm or correct this dating.

E, F, I and J) are better preserved and are written on a grey background overlaid over pre-existing figures (*Fig. 16*). As such, the first group of inscriptions seems to be contemporaneous with the murals, while the second was obviously added afterwards. The motif for adding a second set of inscriptions in religious monuments is usually to commemorate a restoration, an addition, a change of sectarian affiliation, or any other action that can be undertaken on such monuments.

The inscriptions of the second set can, for their larger part, be deciphered and translated¹³. But, as we should remind, only half the murals are still preserved, and as such the inscriptions of this second set are incomplete. To add to the difficulty, the meaning of Buddhist terms in inscriptions can considerably vary, especially in Kagyugpa schools¹⁴. As such, given the fragmentary nature of the inscriptions and the variability of the terms used, the reading of these inscriptions is rather delicate. What follows is only an attempt intended to provide a first understanding of the monument's background¹⁵.

Apart from purely religious content identifying the iconographic program as "a spiritual sphere of Avalokiteśvara" (Inscription C), they also reveal what appears to have been the original motive for the construction of the *chorten* and for the addition of the second set of inscriptions. Five inscriptions (A, C, D, F and J) refer to a particular type of ceremony, *dgongs rdzogs*, related to death-anniversary commemorations. Furthermore, two inscriptions (Inscriptions C and D) state that this ceremony was performed in the memory of a certain Drungba Rinpoche (Dung or Drung ba rin po che), and that the program of the murals is dedicated to him. In this particular context, we propose to interpret "Drungba" as a title rather than as a name. Indeed, the title "Drungba" can be assigned to any high-ranking lama, making it difficult to venture who it might have been. Nonetheless, the murals can likely be understood as having been executed in the context of the death of this Drungba Rinpoche. And the second set of inscriptions as having been added during a ceremony commemorating his death.

However, it is also possible that the second set of inscriptions was a later addition attributing the murals to Drungba Rinpoche without him being the person for whom they were made. If this is the scenar-

¹³ We warmly thank the Ven. Dorje Tsering Domkhar and Tsewang Gonbo Domkhar for their help in this undertaking, and we happily acknowledge the insightful comments of Amy Heller, Jonathan Guyon Le Bouffy and Bettina Zeisler that enabled us to reach a better understanding of the inscriptions and their content – any error of fact or interpretation is our responsibility only.

¹⁴ Schicklgruber 2009, p. 11.

¹⁵ We hope that in the future more competent specialists will bring more learned readings of the inscriptions. For interested scholars, we are happy to share our documentation on request.

io that happened, and if we focus on the time period following the execution of the murals, i.e. if we look at the period following the second quarter of the 15th century or first quarter of the 16th century, then one lead might be worth exploring. The local tradition retains an important religious figure named Drungba Dorje Zangpo (Drung ba rDo rje bzang po) who, after extensive travels to Tibet, founded Matho *gonpa* in the 16th century¹⁶ – the first Sakya monastery in Ladakh. A lineage was thus established, and this Drungba Rinpoche became famous and influential at the court as the religious teacher (*dbu bla*) of king Jamyang Namgyal ('Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal; turn of the 17th century)¹⁷. The dates, the situation of Markha village within the sphere of influence of Matho *gonpa* (only thirty kilometers away), and the great reputation of this monk make a dedication of a reuse of this *chorten* to this Drungba Rinpoche a possibility, and as such a lead to explore¹⁸. Nevertheless, "Drungba" being in this case more likely a title than an actual name, as we saw previously, no historical figure can be identified with certainty¹⁹.

The Column

The history of this monument becomes further intriguing when one considers its column (*Fig. 17*). As we already fully described it elsewhere²⁰, we will only sum up here the main points for its analysis.

Its shaft is fluted and topped with a carved capital. One face has a Buddha sitting in an architectural niche at its centre, while the edges are decorated with floral scrolls. The other has Avalokiteśvara sitting in another niche with *makara* heads on the edges. The faces of both deities were deliberately damaged at an unknown point in the past. One lateral side has a protrusion that appears to be a sculpted lion, above which is a recess destined to receive a connecting piece of wood. These elements lead to consider the column as part of a former

¹⁶ A cave at the foot of the monastery is supposed to have been Drungpa Dorje's meditation space. A *chorten* has been built inside, and the cave is still a place of worship.

¹⁷ Petech 1977, p. 37.

¹⁸ The fact that Matho belongs to the Sakya sect while the iconographic program of the murals shows a Drigung Kagyud affiliation would not necessarily be seen as a contradiction by most Ladakhis. Many temples that were originally Sakya or Drigung foundations were later converted to Drukpa or Gelugpa sects. See for example the case of Lingshed monastery (Linrothe 2007, p.50). The title of Rinpoche is theoretically reserved to reincarnated lamas, but it is sometimes attributed to highly respected religious figures, even if unofficially.

¹⁹ For example, the Wakha-Mulbek area also retains the name of a certain Drungba Dorje, associated with some *chortens* in Shergol (Jina 2009, p.150-153).

²⁰ Devers et Vernier 2011, p. 76 ; Vernier et Devers 2012.

larger wooden structure, such as a portico. Furthermore, this column can be linked to another woodcarving piece located in the neighbouring Teacha *gonpa*: a lion-shaped console or beam's end.

Both these pieces exhibit stylistic similitudes. They can be compared with other woodcarvings from Alchi, Wanla or Lhachuse and can even be considered as slightly preceding the so-called "Alchi group of monument" period. As such, these woodcarvings can probably be dated from the 11th or 12th century – depending on the date retained for the Alchi group of monuments²¹. Before to end up in Markha village and in Teacha *gonpa*, as stated, these pieces were probably part of a same portico that got dismantled in the past. Based on the dating proposed by Kerin in her study of Skyu ancient chapel²², and considering that this chapel was, according to us, perhaps once one of two chapels enclosing a larger temple²³, we proposed to seek the origin of this portico in Skyu – Sumda Chenmo area being another more distant possible origin²⁴.

Conclusion

The *chorten* in Markha village is singular by the set of its elements. They give insights into a rich interlocked history. It probably began in the 11th or 12th century with a temple of significant size, which featured an elaborate wooden structure such as a portico. For some reason, this temple got dismantled some years, decades or centuries later, and one of its columns was reused in this *chorten*, constructed some time towards the end of the 15th or beginning of the 16th century – though this dating could be reviewed in the future as this type of murals has been little studied and published so far. Later, in a second impulse, a second set of inscriptions was added over the murals as a dedication to a high lama, whose name or rather title was Drungba Rinpoche. According to these inscriptions, the original context of construction of the *chorten* was the death of this high lama, and the context of the addition of the second set of inscriptions was a ceremony commemorating his death. At some point in time after this ceremony, a probable deliberate act of destruction occurred that

²¹ The two main and most recent propositions for dating the Alchi Sumtseg are the late 11th century as discussed by Philip Denwood (Denwood 2007), and the early 13th century as considered by Christian Luczanits (Luczanits 2007). If we consider this column to be preceding the Alchi group of monument period, it is from the early 11th century in the case of a late 11th century dating for the Alchi Sumtseg, or from somewhere in the 12th century in the case of an early 13th century dating.

²² Kerin 2007.

²³ Devers et Vernier 2011, p. 65-66.

²⁴ Vernier et Devers 2012, p. 451 n. 14.

caused the degradation of the faces. Finally, in more recent times, two events took place that resulted on one hand in the burying of the door, and on the other in the collapse of the back wall. They both account for the abandonment of the *chorten*, as well as for the gradual forgetting of its history. We hope that further researches will help revive it and shed new light on this piece of Ladakhi heritage.

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Fig. 1: Markha chorten from the south. (Vernier 2009).

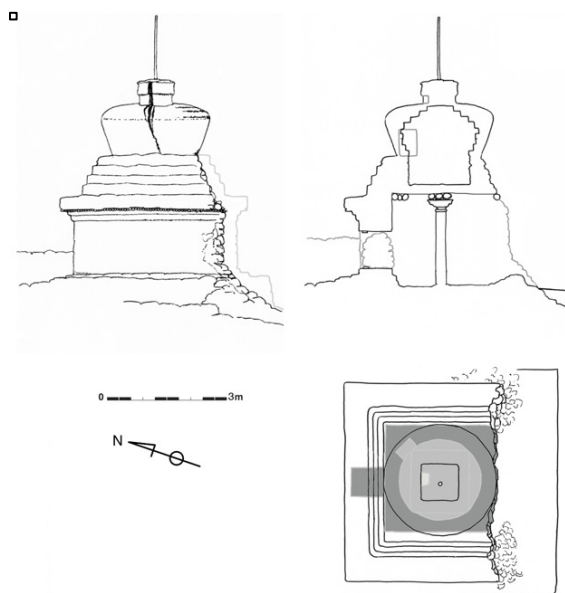


Fig. 2: Elevation and section of Markha chorten. (Vernier 2009).



Fig. 3: Half-buried entrance. (Devers 2009).

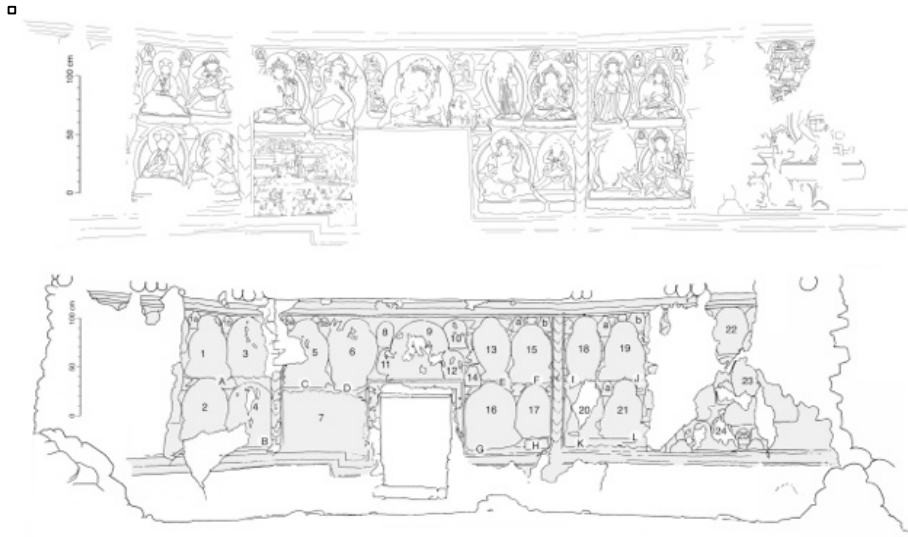


Fig. 4: Above: Outline drawing of the murals. Below: numbering of the figures (numerals) and of the inscriptions (letters). (Vernier 2009).

Right wall: 1. Padmasambhava 2. A monk 3. Chakrasaṃvara in union with Vajravārāhī 4. Four-armed Mahākāla Entrance Wall: 5. Śaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara 6. Machig Labdron 7. Scene with drinking monks and assisting laypeople. 8. Vajrayoginī? 9. Four-armed Mahākāla 10. Simhaṃukhā 11. Form of Mahākāla? 12. Śrī Devī (Palden Lhamo)	13. Achi Chokyi Dolma? 14. Amitābha? 15. Mañjuśrī 16. Vajravīṇāśarasvatī 17. Chakrasaṃvara in union with Vajravārāhī Left wall: 18. Avalokiteśvara 19. Śaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara 20. Hayagrīva? 21. White Tārā 22. Buddha Śākyamuni 23. Amitābha 24. ? 25. ?
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Fig. 5: Identification of the figures depicted on the murals.



Fig. 6: Murals left on the right wall. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 7: Entrance wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures – there might be as such a bit of geometrical distortion. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 8: Entrance wall, figure 17. Blue protector engaged in a sexual union with a red partner. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 9: Left wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures – there might be as such a bit of geometrical distortion. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 10: Left wall, figure 18: probably a form of Avalokiteśvara. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 11: Left wall, figure 22: Śākyamuni Buddha. (Devers 2009).



Fig. 12: Entrance wall, scene (7 on Fig. 4). (Devers 2009).

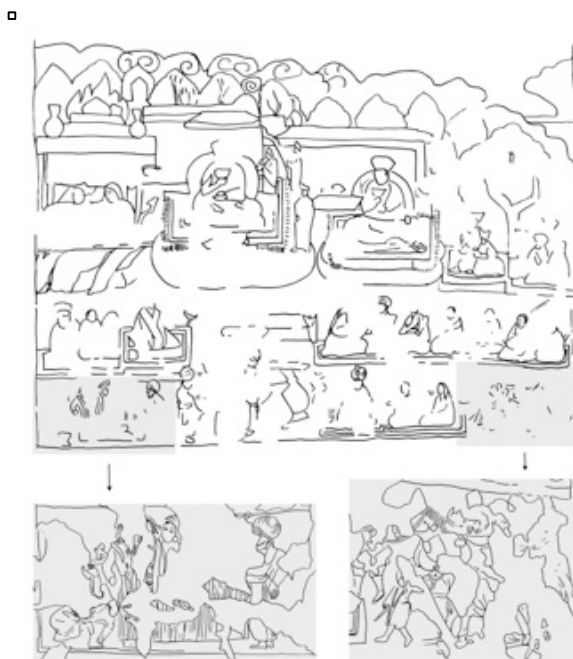


Fig. 13: Outline drawing of the scene on the entrance wall. (Vernier 2009).



Fig. 15: Example of inscription from the first set (inscription K).
(Devers 2009).



Fig. 16: Example of inscription from the second set (inscription A).
(Devers 2009).



Fig. 17: Eastern side of the capital. (Devers 2009).

