

New discoveries for the history of Buddhism in Ladakh: the MAFIL's excavations at Khardong Choskor



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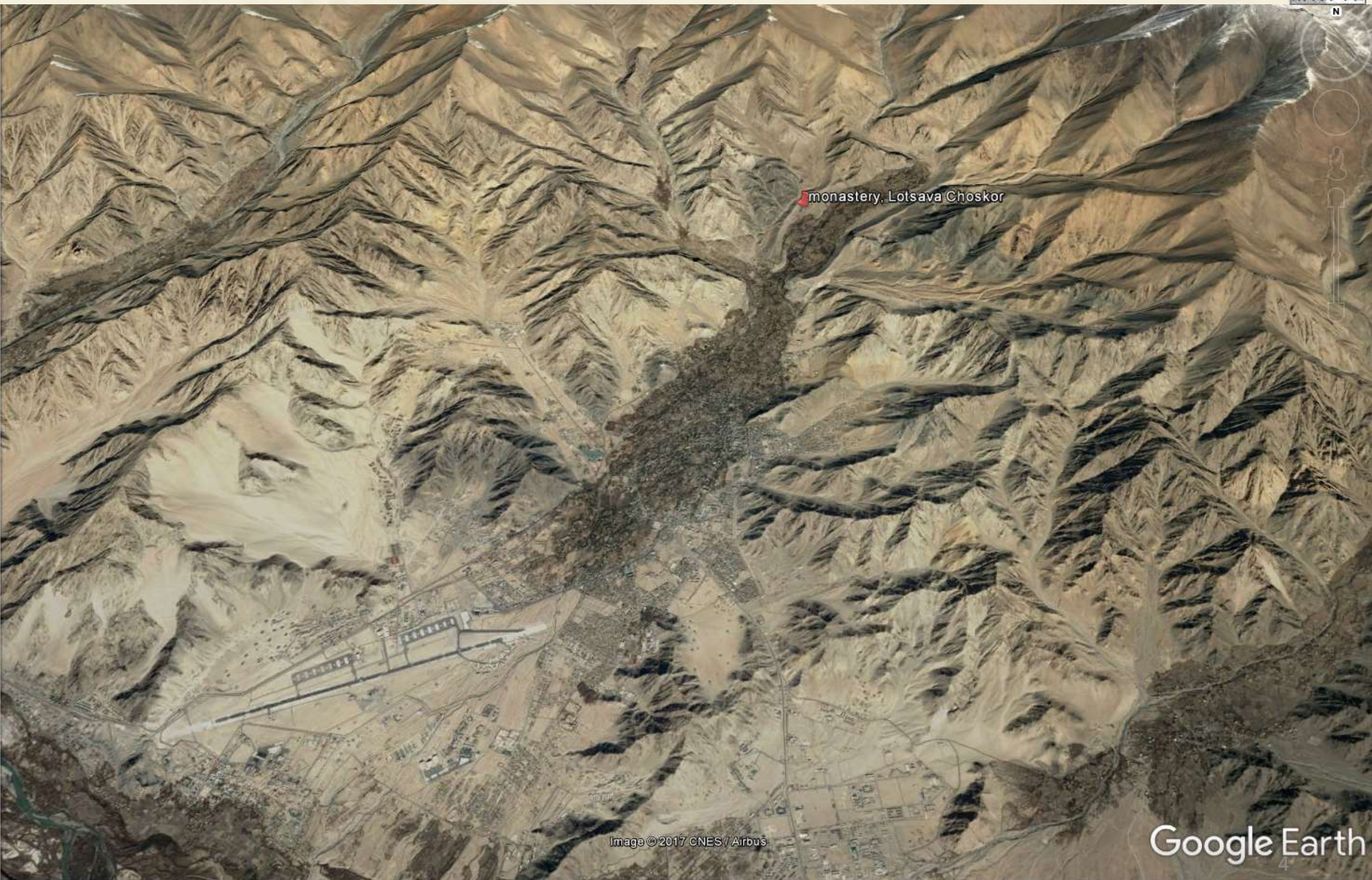
Unexpected last minute events prevented us from coming to the 18th Conference of the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) held in Bedlewo (Poland, 2nd-6th May 2017) and share the results of the first ever excavations carried out in Ladakh on a Buddhist site. Therefore we decided to circulate and post this presentation for general information.

May 12th, 2017

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In 2015 and 2016 the MAFIL (Franco-Indian Archaeological Mission in Ladakh), a cooperation project supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Institute in India, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Pethub Khangtsen Education Society worked at a Buddhist site located north of Leh oasis, in vicinity to the village of Gonpa, at the foot of the Khardong pass, and locally known as *Lotsava Choskor*. The site was previously reported by Francke, Snellgrove & Skorupski as well as NIRLAC.

Location of the archaeological site, north of Leh



monastery, Lolsava Choskor

Image © 2017 CNES / Airbus

Google Earth

4

As noted by Snellgrove & Skorupski the term *choskor* suggests a religious place of some importance. The place is traditionnally associated with Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055).

Indeed, the most noticeable remains are that of mud brick temple, similar to the well-known ruined temples of Nyarma.

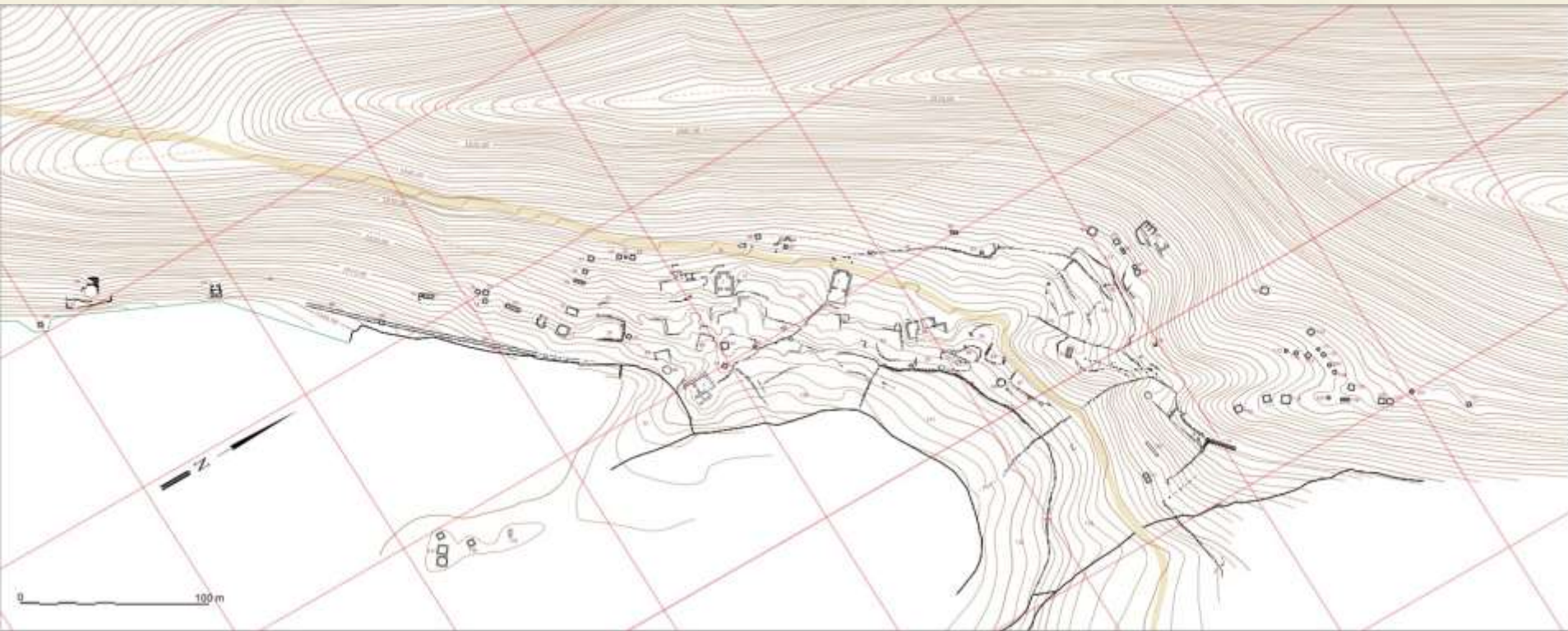
In 2015 the MAFIL documented and mapped 137 archaeological structures at the site of Khardong Choskor:

- 3 ruined temples

- 45 chortens

- numerous possible housing (monastery?) and funerary structures, canals, terraces along with unidentified remains.

Khاردong Choskor site: 137 ruined structures*



Scale: 1 / 1000

** the complete list of structures is found in MAFIL's 2015 report*



View from the site of Khardong
Choskor towards the Stok range
(south), average elevation: 3800m



Satellite view of the
archaeological area
(about 24 hectares).

Khardong Choskor site: 3 temples and 45 chortens



Pink circles indicate the location of the three ruined temples

Chortens similar in type and displaying mud plastered lotus petals (a stylistic element encountered only at ancient Buddhist sites in Ladakh, that is to say dating from the Later Spread), are known at: Trakhung Kowache, Nyarma, Shera, Shernos, Ensa, Sabu, Runtse, Staglung (see note 16 in Devers / Bruneau / Vernier 2014).

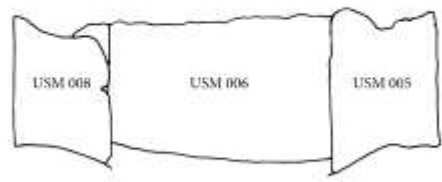
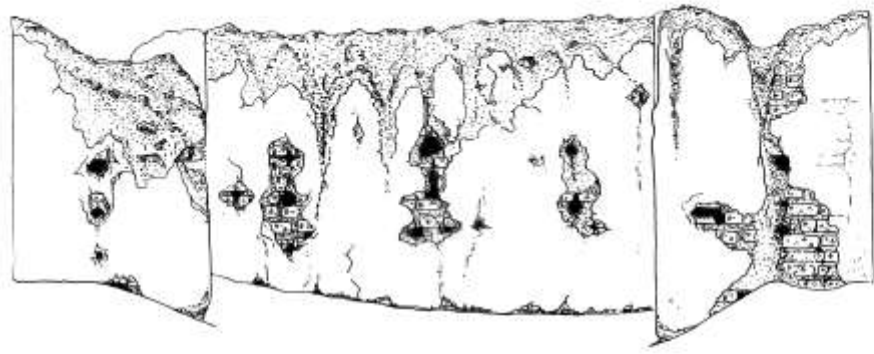


Building 1, located at the centre of the archaeological area was identified as a temple on the basis of its ground plan as well as plugholes and fainted halo remains distributed on its inner walls.

Entrance of the temple is facing south-east.

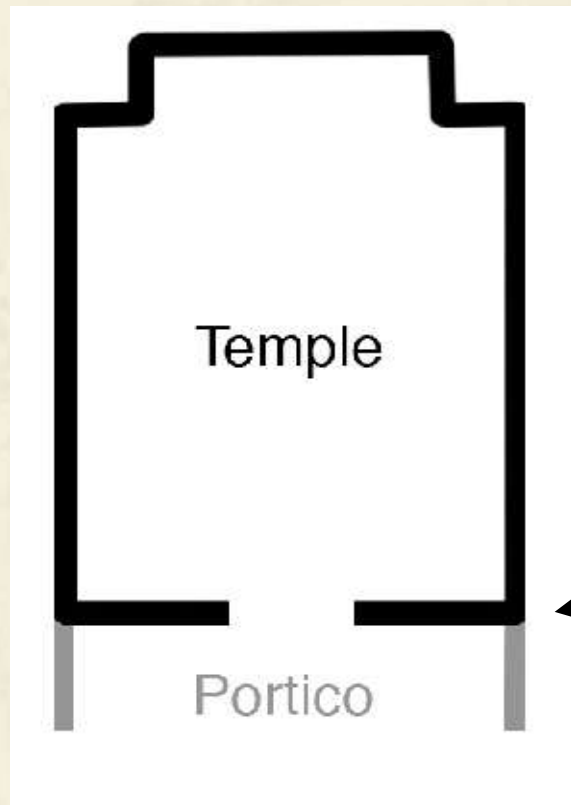
Elevation of preserved walls: almost 4m in height.

Surface of temple: 9,2m by 13,65 m (about 125m square)



| | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Date: sept 2015 | Drawing: M. Vernier / S. Broglia | |
| Scale: 1:33 | USM: 008, 006, 005 | |
| | Site: Chokhor | Code: L-LEH-B02-101 |
| West wall, inside elevation | | |

Khardong Choskor: temple 1



- Two building phases were identified on basis of architecture:
- 1/ mud brick building phase, erected on stone foundations (corresponding to the black line drawing: rectangular ground plan with an apse)
 - 2/ addition of a mud mortared stone masonry verandah erected on an artificial platform (corresponding to the grey line drawing)

Temple 1, Khardong Choskor site in course of excavations, August-September 2016



1

Only half of the inner surface of the temple was excavated (about 60m square).



2



3

Sections were left at the foot of the inner walls in order not to weaken their stability.



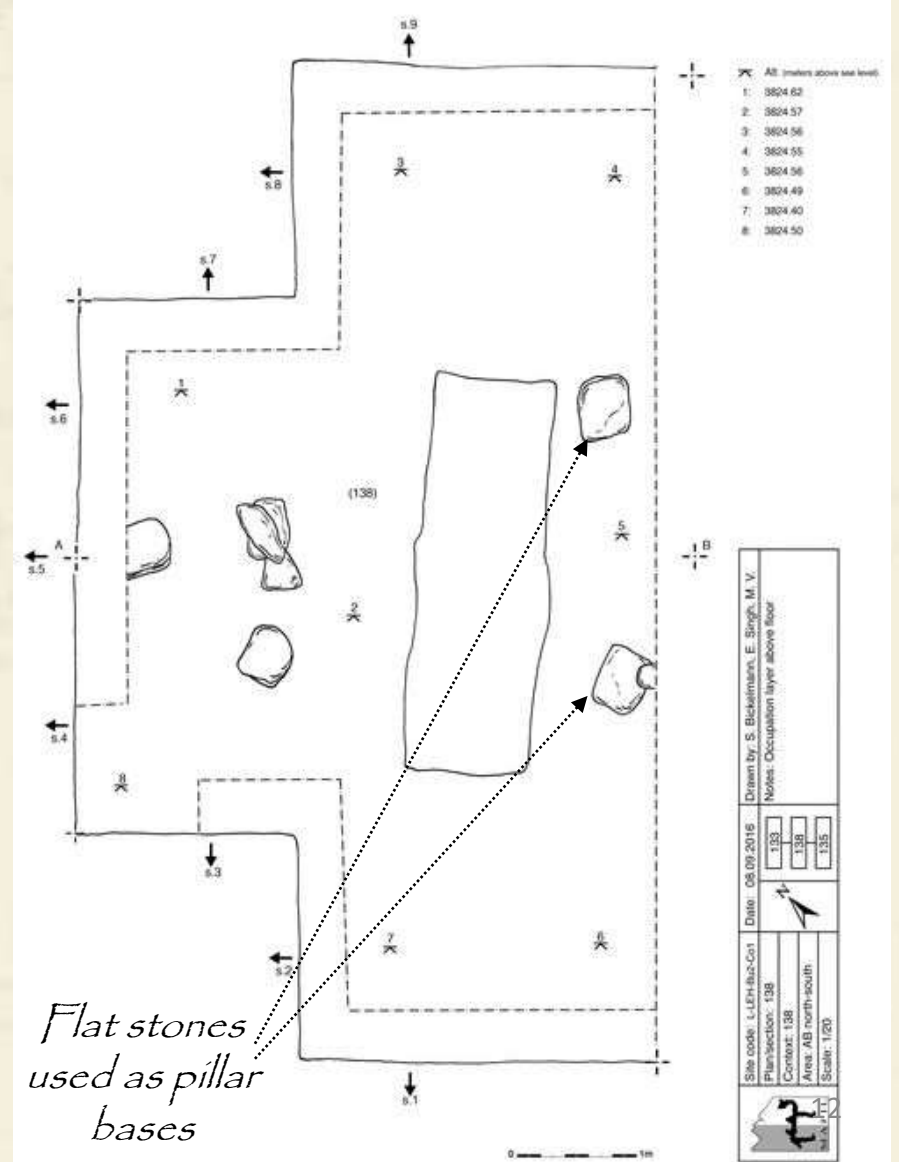
4

11

Understanding the temple's architecture: wooden remains of roofing and pillared upper structure



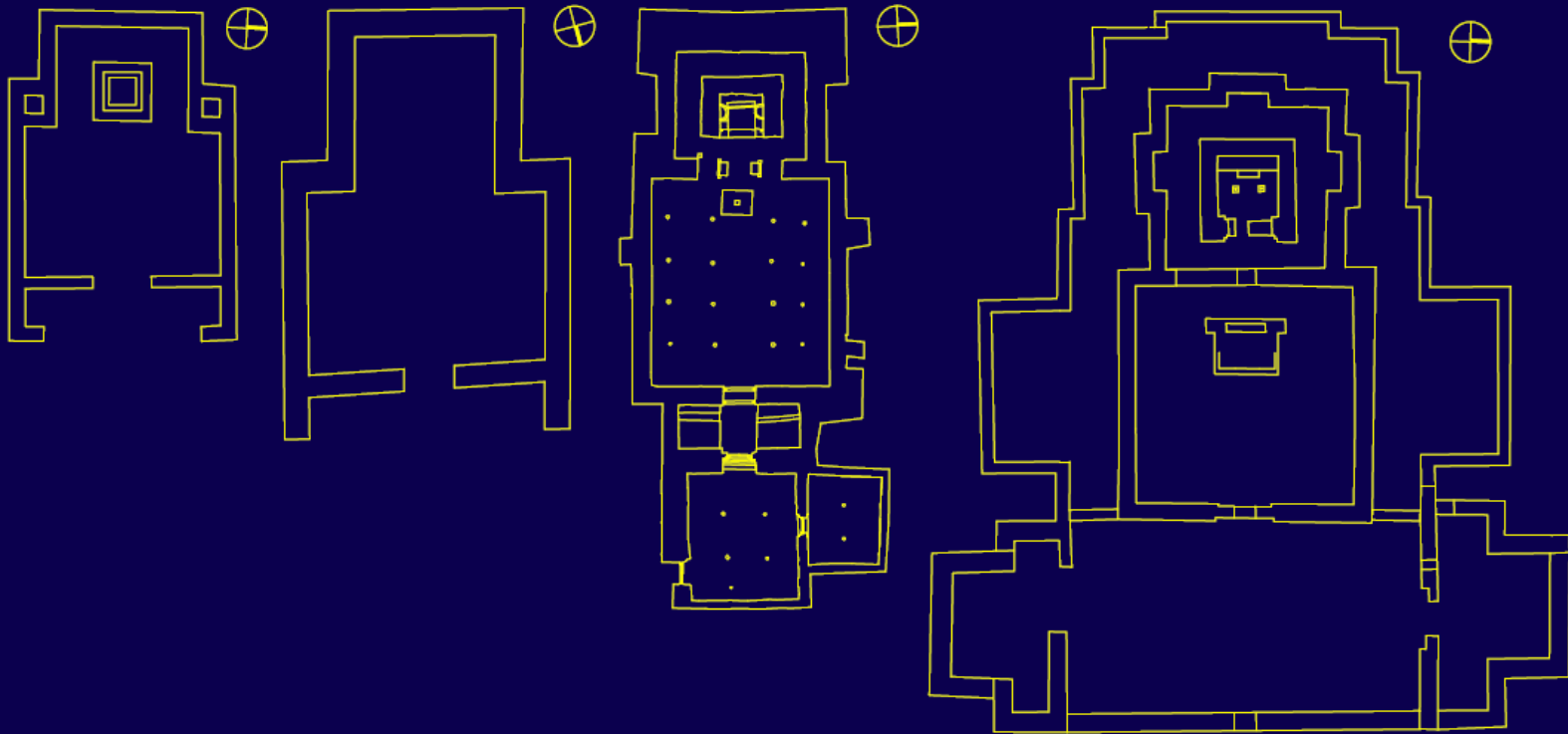
Organic elements from the collapsed roof



The main temple of Khardong Choskor fits the typology
of early Western Himalayan Buddhist temples
(11th-13th centuries AD)

Typology of the Temples

FWF-FSP - University of Vienna / University of Technology Graz / Holger Neuwirth



5^o temple of nyarma

2^o temple of nyarma

vihara of labo

main temple of nyarma

Out of the 30 or so temples studied by Holger Neuwirth for the typology of early Western Himalayan Buddhist temples, only 7 display a rectangular plan with an apse.

[Tabo's Maitreya and large Brom-ston temples, Sumda's main temple, Mangyu's Vairocana temple, Alchi's Dukhang, two of the ruined temples of Nyarma and the ruined temple (Gyatsa) of Tholing]

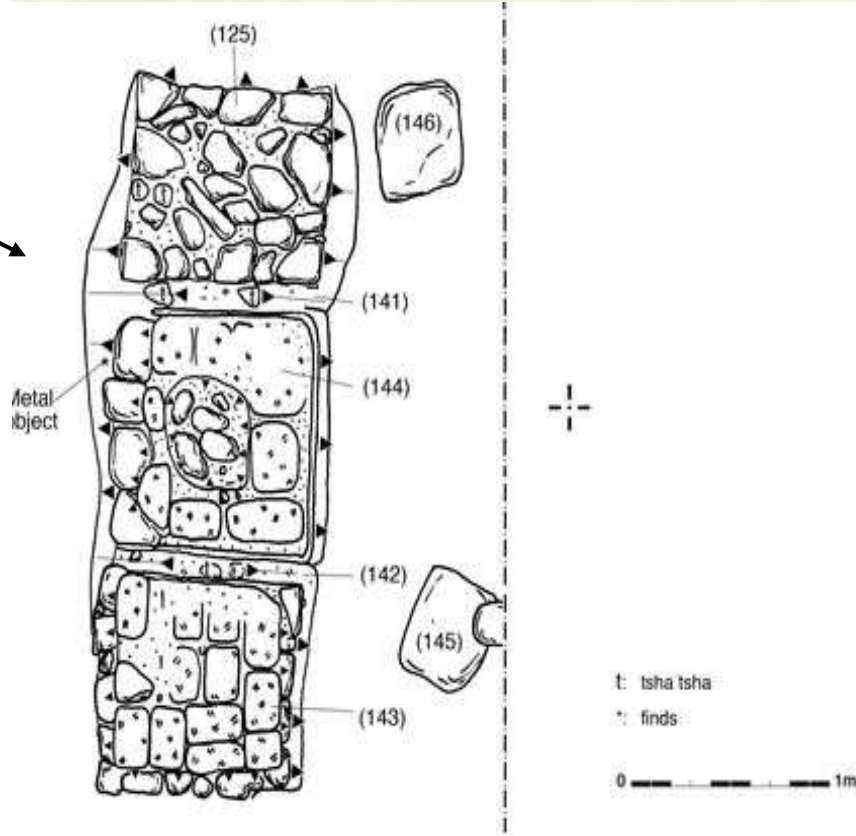
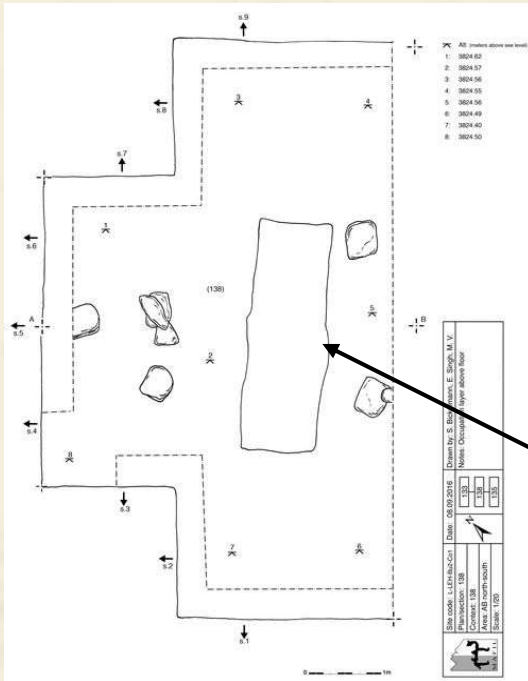
All seven temples display a verandah and all extant temples at Tabo, Sumda, Mangyu and Alchi are pillared (4 or 6 pillars).

The ruined temples of Nyarma and Tholing have not been excavated.

The flat stones exposed in the middle of Khardong Choskor's main temple and interpreted as pillar bases are thus consistent.

However, since only half of the inner surface of the temple was excavated it is not yet possible to state whether it was four or six pillared.

Identification of rituals



2/ It does not seem likely that votive *chortens* or statues in clay were built on top of the square structures. However we cannot rule out the possibility that such elements were made of more perishable or transportable (wood or metal for instance) material.

1/ Three central adjacent square structures (each 1m square and 20cm in height) were exposed in front of the apse in the middle of the temple.

All consist in a stone platform with mudbricks on top. No material originating from a possible upper structure was identified in course of excavation.

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|---|
| | Site code: L-LEH-Bu2-Co1 | Date: 08.09.2016 | Drawn by: S.B., E. S., M. V. |
| | Plan/section: 139 detail | 125/141-146 | Notes: detail of central structure contexts |
| | Context: multi-context | | |
| | Area: AB north-south | | |
| Scale: 1/20 | -- | | |

Identification of rituals



Objects (*tsha tsha*, pottery fragments, a coin and a metal object) were found within the square structures, in between them and next to them.



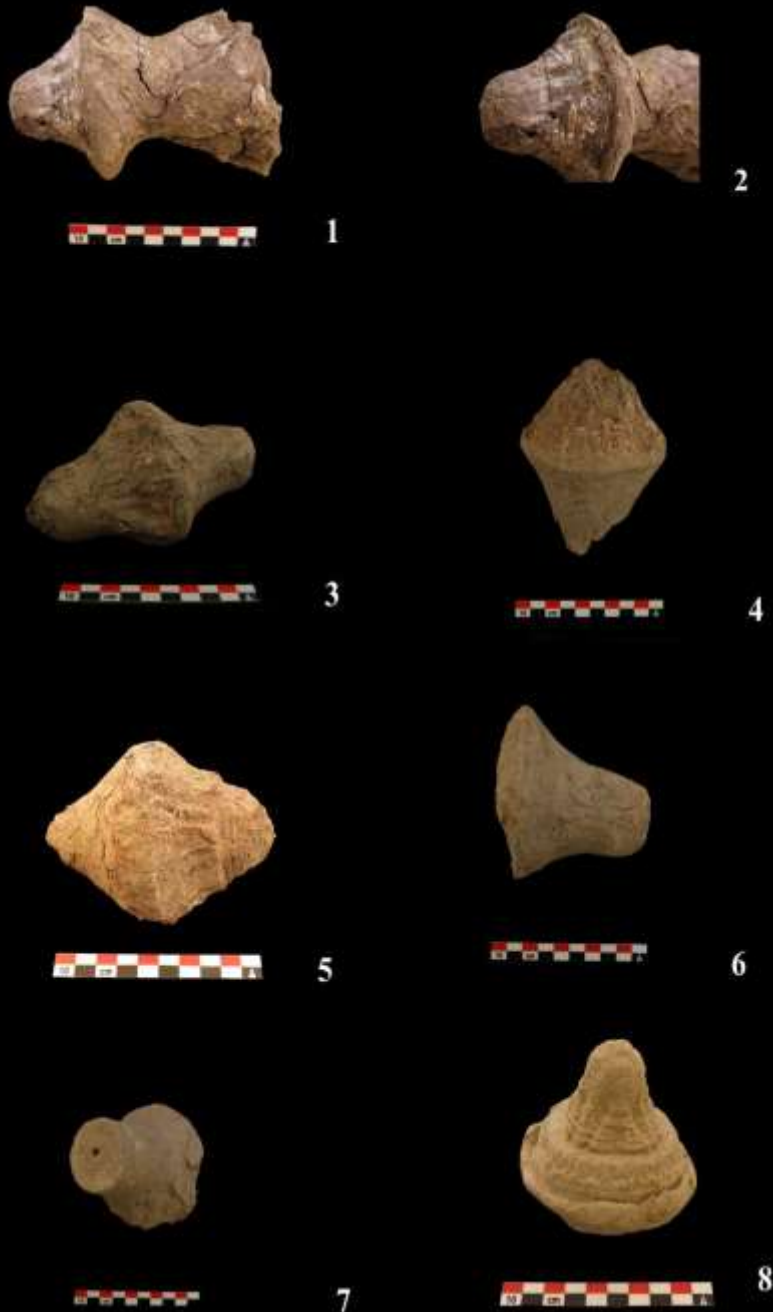
Identification of rituals

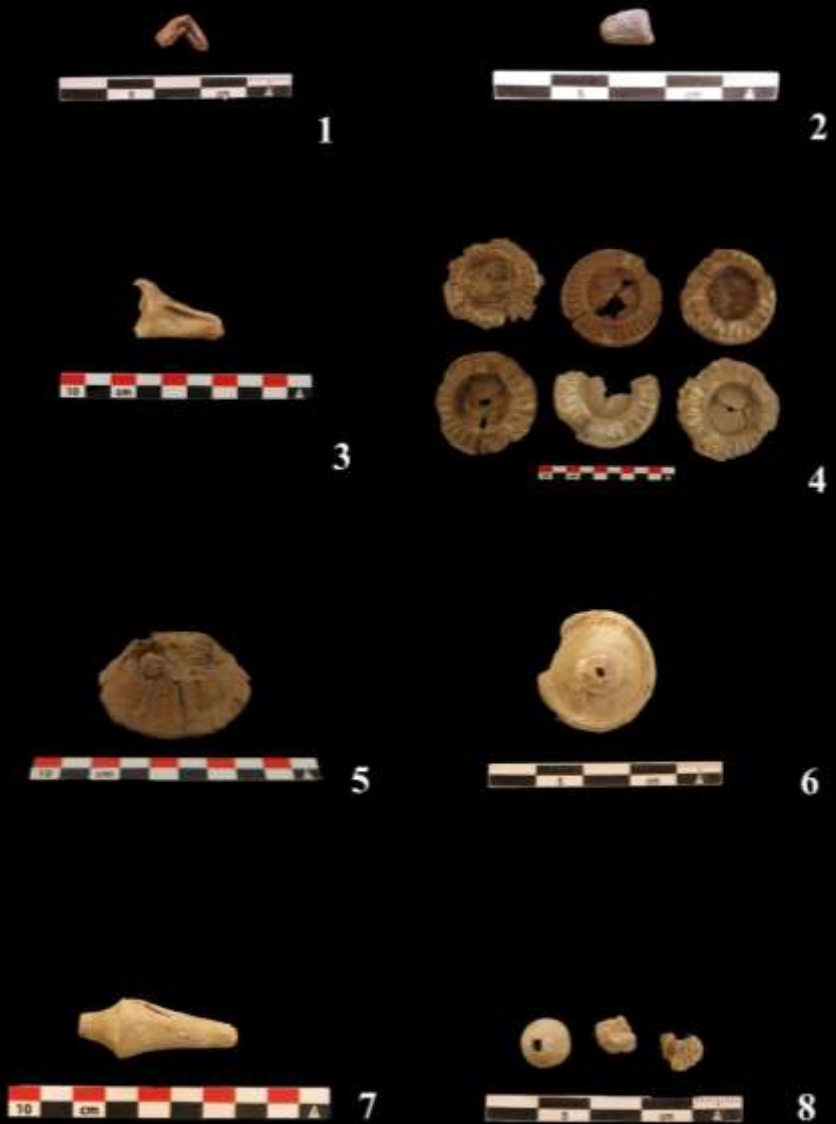
Sixteen *tsha tsha* were recovered: three from the apse and all the others from, in between, next to or within the central square structures.

All *tsha tsha* are *stūpa* shaped. Most have an elongated conical base on which rests a stepped *stūpa*.

Several bear traces of paint (red, green and black) and have a hole drilled at either at the bottom of the base or at the top of the *stūpa* (in some cases both).

Only two bear an inscription (both in Tibetan).





Some *tsha tsha* were broken: bone fragments were recovered as well as a small folded birch bark sheet found in association with a small polished grey stone (n° 1-3).

Small clay objects were found in association with the *tsha tsha*: pearls, discs and elongated conical elements: see (n° 6-8). All objects are pierced.

Sixteen round clay dishes (about 7,5cm in diameter and 1 cm in height) were also found in association with the *tsha tsha* (n° 4). They are all pierced in their center and decorated with engraved lotus petals (sometimes painted) on the edge.

The picture below shows how these various elements may have been used in relation with the *tsha tsha*.



Identification of rituals



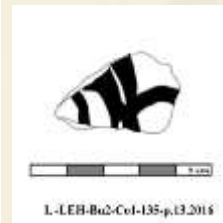
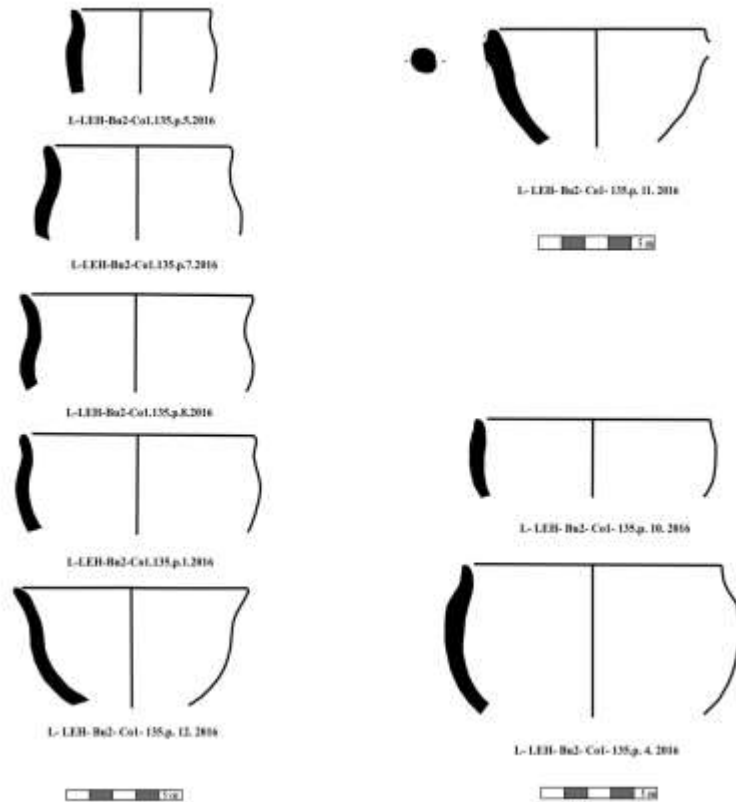
Apart from *tsha tsha* and associated clay objects, pottery sherds were recorded next to the central square structures.

Some were found in between the structures and thus clearly reused in the construction process.

One sherd was found in the filling of the central structure. These sherds correspond to small globular pots (10cm in diameter).

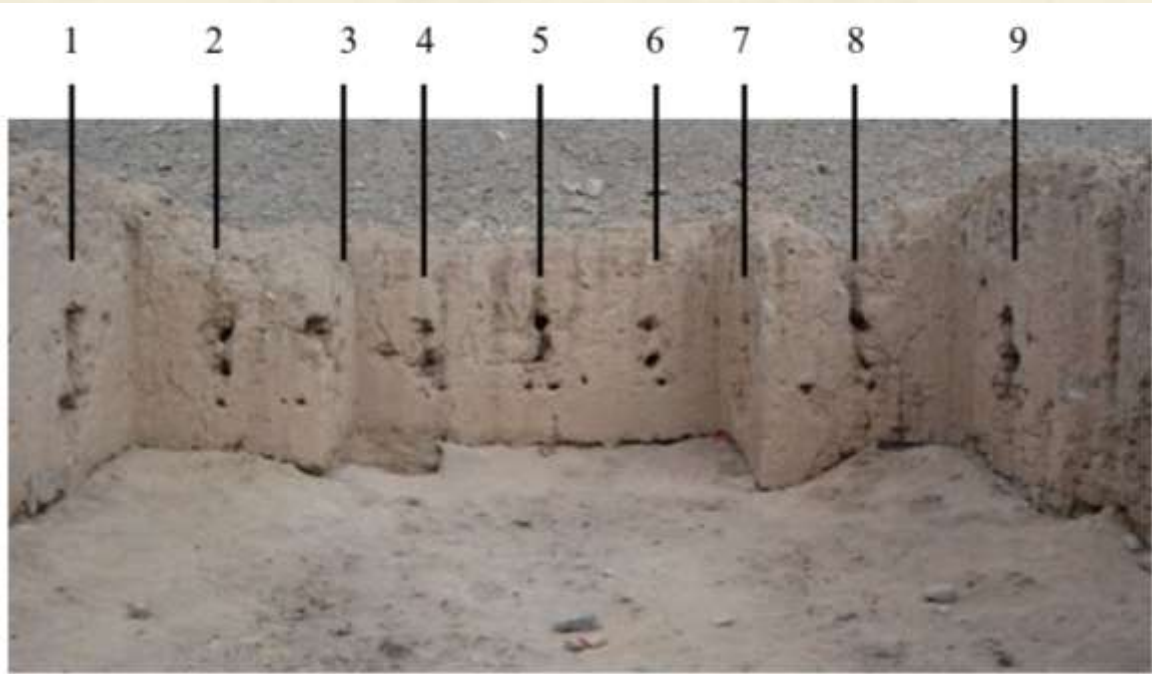
In the area immediately west of the structures that contained ashy material 13 diagnostic sherds were recovered, among which a painted one.

The typology also consists in small globular pots (about 10cm in diameter) with widen rims, with or without neck.



Sherds from layer 135

Identifying the iconographic program of the temple



Based on the size and layout of the plugholes visible on the inner walls of the temple, it is possible to assert that the temple once sheltered **nine seated deities**, made of clay, distributed on its side walls and rear niche.



Wooden pegs and pieces of wood, most probably once part of a wooden armature onto which the clay body of the sculptures was constructed, were found in course of excavations.

Fragments of clay painted faces (in white, red, blue or green) were unearthed along with broken elements (noses and ears). Other elements such as fingers, hair or deteriorated body parts were also recovered.

From these elements we know that the seated deities were about life-size.

Several fragments of large, pointed and molded lotus petals (either painted blue or red) belonging to the throne on which the deities rested, were exposed.



*Fragments of clay painted lotus petals
once adorning the throne of the seated deities.*

Fragments of clay sculptures





Broken pieces of vajra painted black and/or blue were discovered, being so far the only identifiable attribute.

Many fragile and intricate fragments of ornamentation, such as pearls of ranks, rounded and drop shaped elements and scrolls, to describe a few only, were discovered.



Fragments of mural paintings, displaying mostly white, black, red and blue paints were recovered. Some elements of vegetal decoration are recognizable (picture on the left),.

The largest fragment recovered (picture below) displays two white geese, painted head to tail, contoured in red on a blue background.

Very thin pieces of painted wood, from the ceiling or other painted wooden elements, were also identified in course of excavations.



Concerning the iconography and style of the clay decoration of early Buddhist temples in the Western Himalayas we can rely on the in-depth and reference study carried out by C. Luczanits (2004).

He writes: “Constituting the main images of many early western Himalayan monuments, the clay sculptures represent the main iconographic topics, and an examination of them is indispensable for the identification and analysis of the iconographic programme of the temples.” (p. 202)

As explained above 9 seated deities, made of clay, were occupying the apse and side walls of the temple of Khardong Choskor. This particular arrangement of life-size deities hanging on the walls at eye level and seating on lotus thrones, strongly recalls the decoration of the Assembly Hall of Tabo’s main temple.

Presumably, a mandalic configuration once also adorned the walls of Khardong Choskor’s temple. The fragments of lotus petals excavated in the latter are identical in style and colour to the ones ornamenting the thrones of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Tabo’s Assembly Hall.

Because only 1 m² was excavated at the base of the inner walls (where most of the sculptural remains are expected to be found-sections were left at the bottom of the walls in order not to weaken the temple) it is not yet possible to identify the deities displayed in Khardong Choskor’s temple.

The Assembly Hall of Tabo's Main temple (Spiti) indicates how clay statues may once have been displayed within the main temple of Khardong Choskor.

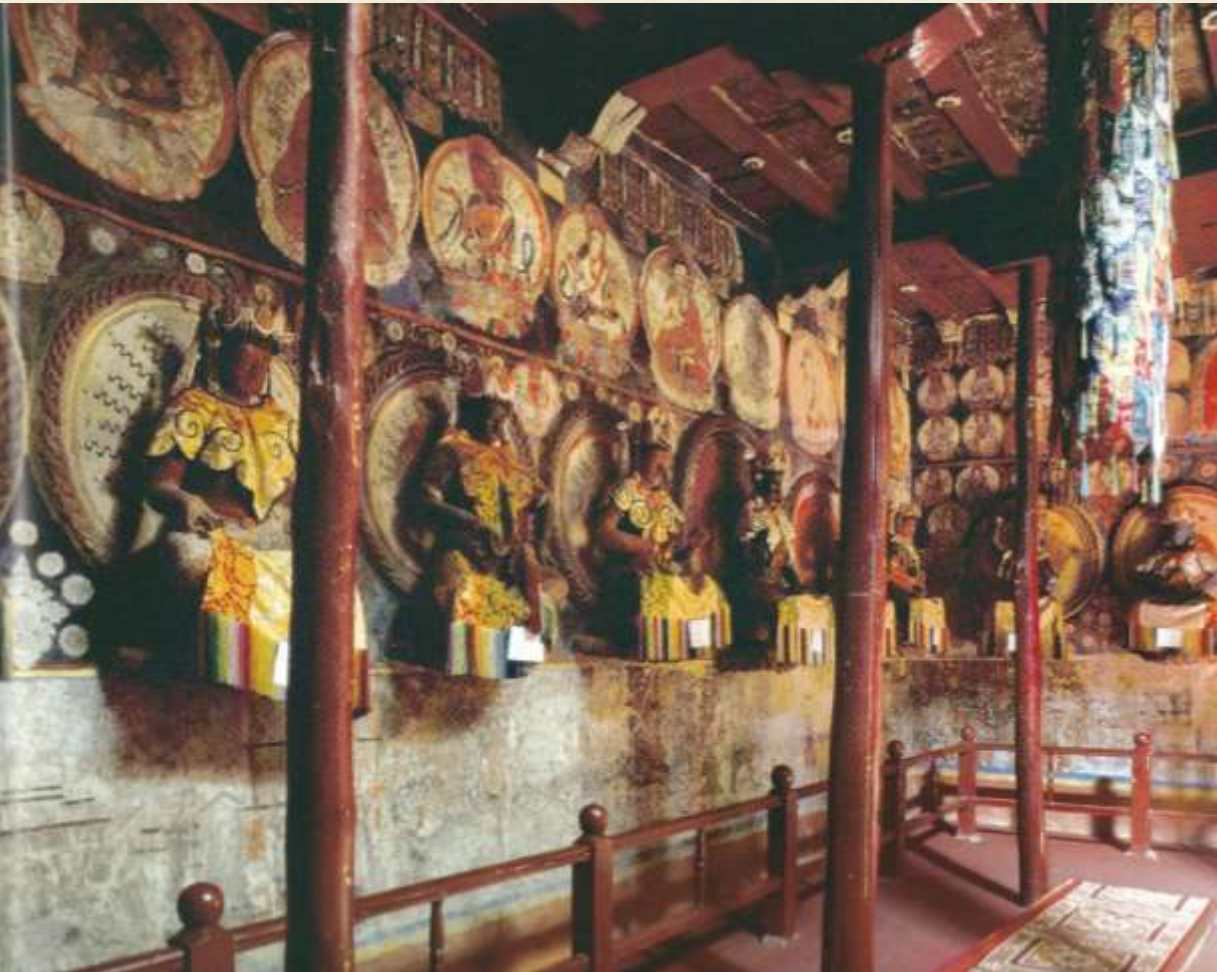


Image: van Ham 2017



Image: Luczanits 2004

Fragments of faces painted red, blue, white and green were found in the apse of Khardong Choskor's main temple with remains of hairline painted black. The curled hair in the middle of one of the foreheads recovered is identical to the hair style of some Bodhisattvas in Tabo's Assembly Hall. Pieces of braids, made of three moulded parallel locks of hair, found at Khardong Choskor are identical to the Jinas' and Bodhisattvas' braids from Tabo.

Although no intact face was recovered at Khardong Choskor the proportions of the various fragments (upper part with hair, forehead and eyebrows or lower part with mouth and chin, as well as broken noses) match the style of Tabo's images. Remains of several *vajras* (painted blue and/or black) were found. However, this attribute is far too common to make any valuable hypothesis on the identification of the deities.

Even if the ornaments retrieved from the temple of Khardong Choskor do not contribute to the identification of the deities, they bring valuable stylistic information. Numerous single, double and triple string of pearls were recovered: they were part of the jewellery once adorning the deities, Jinas and/or Bodhisattavas but also possibly goddesses and protectors. Double strings of pearls are for example used for bracelets, necklaces and jewelled belt of the deities of Tabo's Assembly Hall. Triple strings of pearls are characteristic of the mala hanging from the shoulders of the deities. Such pearl wreaths are visible in Tabo's Assembly Hall, although badly preserved. Single strings of pearls recovered at Khardong Choskor could have been part of jewelled crowns. Larger individual pearls could have adorned the halos of deities such as seen in Tabo. Pendants found at Khardong Choskor were also originally adorning a crown, necklace, bracelet or belt. Square ornaments were most probably the central element of a bracelet or necklace, as is seen in Tabo Assembly Hall. Most ornamentation fragments excavated at Khardong Choskor were painted red, blue, black and white. This same range of colours is found on the murals' fragments recovered at the Khardong Choskor.

Once more, this corresponds to the colours in use at Tabo Assembly Hall.



Comparison of stylistic elements between the clay fragments excavated at the temple of Khardong Choskor (top) and Tabo's Assembly Hall (bottom)



Image: van Ham 2017



Images: Luczanits 2004



The stylistic parallels we are able to draw between the material excavated at Khardong Choskor and Tabo Assembly Hall are very significant. Thanks to two inscriptions painted inside Tabo Main temple we know that it was founded in 996 and renovated in 1042, making it the earliest extant Buddhist temple of the Western Himalayas.

As a result we propose that the main temple excavated at Khardong Choskor was in use at the end of the 10th century / beginning of the 11th century.

Such a dating is supported by the architectural plan of the temple as well as by the *tsha tsha* recovered within. Stūpa shaped *tsha tsha* with long conical bases are in found in an extensive area, from Afghanistan in the west to Tholing in the east passing through Gilgit (northern Pakistan) where they seem to have been in use from the 8th to the 12th century AD. Although such *tsha tsha* were recovered from excavations in Afghanistan it is the first time that they are recovered *in situ* for the Western Himalayas.

At the present state of research we do not know when the temple was founded (an earlier foundation is not to be excluded) and by whom or when and why it was abandoned.

A dozen of samples were collected during the course of excavations in various levels and were recently submitted for C14 dating. Results are expected by the end of 2017.

The questions above (when? why? by whom?) apply to the site of Khardong Choskor as a whole.

Such an important site implies a large and Buddhist community supported by a strong and wealthy political and/or lay community about which we do not know a thing for the time being.

The three ruined temples and the fifty or so ruined *stūpas* of the site of Khardong Choskor make it a key centre for early Buddhism in Ladakh and the Western Himalayas.

So far no mention of the site, that is one the largest archaeological site of Ladakh for the historic period (Francke even used the word 'town' to describe it), has been found in any written source.

Archaeologically speaking, in Ladakh only the site of Nyarma is equivalent in size to that of Khardong Choskor. The former is mentioned in the texts as one of Rinchen Zangpo's three major foundations. The five ruined temples at the site of Nyarma have been architecturally studied (Feiglstorfer, Kozicz, Mani, Neuwirth, Panglung) and their sequence of building is quite certain but none has been excavated or securely dated.

This holds true for other early Buddhist temples elsewhere in the Western Himalayas.

About 25 similar ruined temples are known over Ladakh (a list of 'pre-Alchi' Buddhist ruined temples is found in MAFIL's 2015 report). Only 3 have been architecturally studied to date (Basgo: Luczanits 2005 and Neuwirth; Chigtan: forthcoming paper by Bayerova and Kozicz; temple in between Nyarma and Thiksey: Neuwirth).

Special attention shall be drawn to the ruined temple of Gyamtsa near Gonpa (mentioned by Francke) in a valley adjacent to the site of Khardong Choskor. Other remains in the Leh valley, namely the numerous Buddhist stone sculptures (Alexander/van Schaik; Dorjay; Francke; NIRLAC) as well as the *chorten* of Mane Tsermo and the caves of Trakhung Kowache, most probably corresponding to the earliest phase of Spituk monastery said to have been founded by the Western Tibetan king Ol-de in the first half of the 11th century (NIRLAC, van Ham 2011), point to Leh as being an important centre for Buddhism at the turn of the 2nd millennium. We may even hypothesize that Leh was an important Buddhist centre before the Later Spread emanating from the Western Tibetan Kingdom as some stone sculptures suggest (Linrothe).

Early Buddhist remains in the Leh valley



Francke in the ruins of
Gyamtsa (Gonpa) temple,
1909
[photo: Babu Pindi Lal, Kern
Institute archives, Leiden]

Below: remains of Gyamtsa
temple, 2016



Yellow pins locate Buddhist
stone sculptures.
Red pins locate monuments.

One of the numerous Buddhist
stone sculptures in the Leh valley:
Changspa
(9th century? Linrothe)



MAFIL's future work, 2018-2020



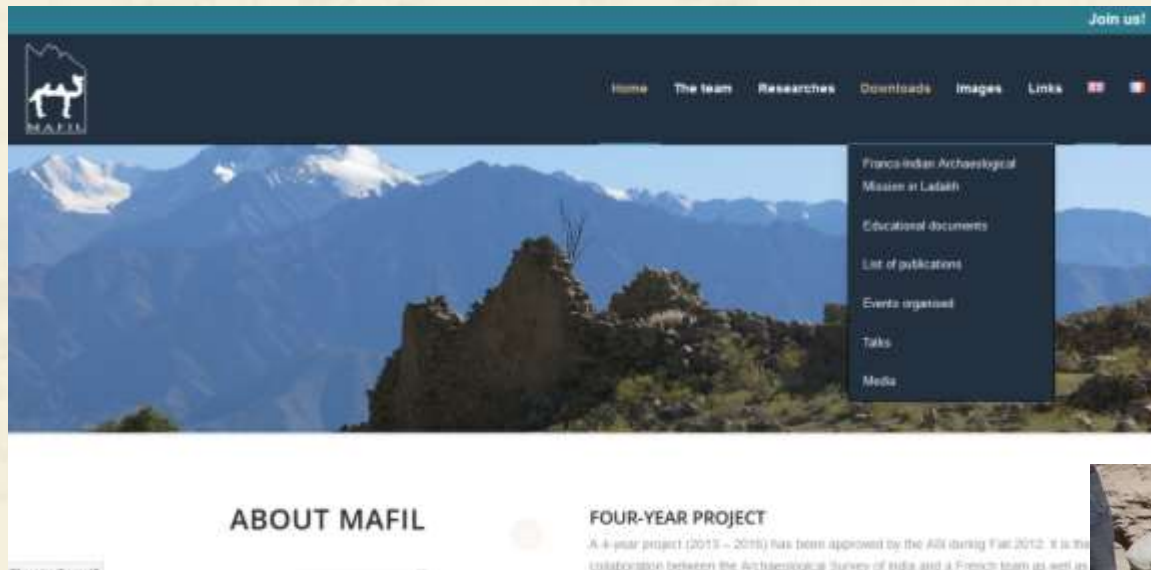
- continuation of excavations at the site of Khardong Choskor;
- material analyses (C14, pigments, composition of building material, etc...)
- wider research program on early Buddhism in Ladakh (based on an analysis of ruined temples and stone sculptures);
- conservation work with the support of local religious authorities.

Graffiti painted in 2013 on the outer walls of Khardong Choskor main temple. The site is mentioned as in 'danger of disappearance' by NIRLAC.



Pūja held at the temple before excavations (left) and visit of religious authorities during excavations (bottom right).

To know more about MAFIL's project:
www.mafil.org



Photos and TV documentary of/about 2016's excavations already online at <https://www.facebook.com/mafil.org/>
Full report on 2016's excavations online soon.



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- Study of archaeological material: L. Bruneau, S. Broglia de Moura, M. Vernier.
- Drawings: S. Broglia de Moura and M. Vernier.
- Topographical maps: J. Suire.
- Photographs: MAFIL, R. Silveston.
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SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS (2015-2016)



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