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Prologue

- 1 Widely hidden from the general sight and after a 15 minutes' walk from Sumur village straight upwards along a small path through sleepy bewildered sea buckthorn gardens, one can reach the Astrologer's temple of Sumur¹ or Onpo² Lhakhang. In September 2016, when for the first time I entered the yard below the actual temple, the front facade was showing traces of very recent and incomplete construction works. Unlike the untouched fairytale-like atmosphere of the sea buckthorn orchards, the front of the temple displayed the results of modern additions to a once open veranda which had been closed by a new wall with large windows and a new door (fig. 1). The temple had originally been built in accordance with the topography with the facade facing the valley and – regards to the cardinal directions – the western direction. No other parts of the temple can be seen from the yard than this facade and juniper branches tied together by white scarfs which constitute the upper-most of an archaic shrine (*lhatho*, Tib. *lha tho*), which would normally enshrine a local protective deity. It is placed on the roof of the veranda at its north-western corner. Such setting would normally hardly attract any scholarly interest. In my case, the interest in this temple was triggered by a small note in the NIRLAC (Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture) inventory of cultural sites of Ladakh and in particular by some information I had received from Diana Lange who had visited the temple the year before.

Figure 1. The yard of the Sumur Onpo Lhakhang



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- 2 According to the brief description in the NIRLAC catalogue the temple had been built by a certain Onpo Tashi in 1775 (NIRLAC 2008, p. 337). The monument is noted as a Nyingmapa site and a close relation to other sites in the Nubra valley where other astrologer (Tib. *onpo*) families had been active is mentioned. The note on a Nyingmapa background is not further explained even though it already hints at some unexpected fact, namely a presence of the Old Order of Tibetan Buddhism in Nubra which has so far been considered as a sort of uncontested Gelugpa heartland within the territory of Ladakh. Secondary literature on the cultural history of Nubra has been repeatedly highlighting the unrivaled dominance of the order of the Dalai Lama in the valley from the very early days of recorded Buddhist monastic activities in the valley³. Nevertheless, this vague short note would have hardly attracted my interest if a description of a certain setting inside the temple had not been provided to me by Diana Lange: a pyramid-like structure in the centre of a four-pillared hall right below a mandala in a box-like lantern above. The mandala was of the same type which I had documented in 2011 inside a passageway stupa nearby the Minister's Palace or Zimskhang of Hunder, the ancient economic and administrative center of Nubra⁴ (figs 2-4).

Figure 2. The passageway stupa of Hunder



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Figure 3. Sectional perspective of the Hunder stupa



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Figure 4. View into the chamber



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- 3 The mandalas are of the same type and chambers lack the usual lantern structure of “rotating squares”. Instead, they have flat ceilings. The mandala is the cycle of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, better known as the “zhitro” (Tib. *zhi khro*) mandala. It visualizes the forces one encounters during the transition process between death and rebirth (*bardo*, Tib. *bar do*). It originates from a compendium of texts entitled *Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*. It is fundamental to the Nyingmapa Tradition since it is considered to have been composed by Padmasambhava in the 8th century who then concealed the text. In the 14th century the “treasure finder” or *terton* (Tib. *gter ston*) Karma Lingpa rediscovered the text and only afterwards it was developed into one of the most important cycles of Tibetan Buddhism⁵. Beyond its liturgical significance the mandala inside Hunder stupa was noteworthy for several, comparatively simple facts: first, to my knowledge this is the earliest occurrence of this cycle in a passageway stupa in Ladakh and therefore it constituted a doctrinal subject so far not related to the symbolism and the architecture of the stupa. Second, all other versions of this mandala I had come across were composed in a horizontal manner but not within an exact five-fold spatial hierarchy comparable to the chamber of that stupa⁶. Third, the villagers of Hunder called it Nyingmapa stupa. At that time I paid little attention to the fact that the ruined residence of the Hunder Onpo was very close nearby as well.
- 4 This particular mandala is very distinctive in its visual presentation. First, it consists of 42 peaceful deities arranged in a circular order on the ceiling of the stupa chamber and 58 deities displayed over the four vertical planes. Second, this mandala deviates from the basic five-fold conception of the mandalic system since it contains a sixth Buddha, the Buddha Samantabhadra who constitutes the ultimate Buddha essence of the Nyingmapa Tradition⁷. In a corresponding manner, the wrathful deities are also headed by six Herukas (fig. 5). This double five-fold order superimposed by another supra-centric entity had to be arranged within a single, classical five-fold spatial system

which is – at least from an architectural and artistic perspective – an intriguing task⁸. Another noteworthy aspect of the mandala inside the Hunder stupa which was unknown to me by that time from any other stupa, was the exclusive manner in which all the whole chamber had been dedicated to this cycle. There was not a single figure depicted on the four walls and the ceiling which did not belong to this system. Finally, even to the uninitiated the high number of animal headed figures among the entourage of the Herukas – *yogini* (wrathful semi-godesses), gate keepers and *piśācī* (other aggressive entities) – makes that mandala a most impressive visual experience.

- 5 This is why I had been very curious to visit the Onpo Lhakhang of Sumur.

Figure 5. Detail of the southern wall of the Hunder stupa centring on yellow Ratna Heruka (bottom right of the photograph) above whom blue Mahottra Heruka, who corresponds to Samantabhadra, embraces Krodheśvarī. They are surrounded by several *yoginī* of the southern quarter



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The Onpo Lhakhang and its elevated centre

- 6 After climbing a steep, modern staircase made of concrete one may pass through the modern wooden door which was recently placed in the southern corner of the former – now enclosed by the new front wall – veranda to get into a sort of ante-space of the actual hall. Three windows allow for some natural light. This ante-space is of comparatively low room height, measuring approx. 2,80 m only from floor to ceiling (fig. 6). At the northwestern part a solid construction borders the space. On its facing side a male figure riding a snow lion is depicted. The bright colours – mostly a whitish blue and various other soft pastel colours, make it difficult to discern the figure from the cloudy background and the grey-whitish colour of the overall wall. This is obviously the facing wall of the plinth or structural support of the *lhatho* on the roof of the veranda. To both sides of the hall's front entrance wall corridors can be spotted. These are the entrance and exit of the corridor that allows for the ritual “circumambulation”

(Skt. *pradakṣiṇā*) of the sanctum. Due to the clock-wise principle of ambulation one has to enter the path next to the basis of the *lhatho* before proceeding to the hall. Interestingly, the path is not horizontal but follows the natural terrain. This means that one has to climb at the beginning. Since the roof remains at the same level, the height narrows down to about 2,10 m at the rear and widens again by the end. Prayer wheels are attached to all the outer walls of the central hall allowing the devotees to turning the wheels with their right hands during the ambulation. The facing wall of the hall is now showing modern murals of the Four Guardian Kings. Beyond the upper edges of the modern, blue background some fragmentary remains of the original – probably identical – motif can be spotted.

Figure 6. Ante-room

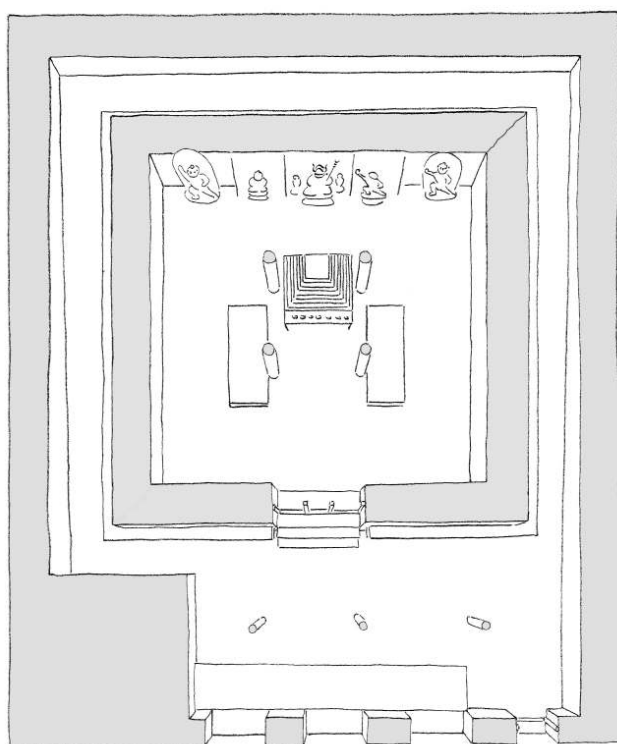


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- 7 The portal and door frame into the hall is not of the common T-shaped type. Instead, it is a tripartite construction topped with a classical multi-layered beam and bracket construction (*shingsag*). This construction method is a typical feature of Himalayan and Tibetan aristocratic architecture used for windows and doors. The combination with the tripartite structure of the opening was widespread for veranda doors. Interestingly, the same construction was also used for the partition of the Lhakhang Nyingma of the Hunder Zimskhang into two chambers. After entering the hall the eyes have to accustom to the light since the only source of light is a lantern construction in the centre of the four-pillared hall (fig. 7). The dim light falls onto the pyramid-like wooden structure which is not exactly placed centrally below the lantern but shifted backwards towards the rear wall (fig. 8). In front of the pyramid stands a table with seven cups used for the daily prayers (Skt. *pūjā*) and other rituals. The pyramid itself recalls the stepped structure of a stupa. A similar structure was documented by John Harrison in the balcony room of the temple of Skurbuchan in Lower Ladakh. According to Harrison⁹, “a two-day prayer ceremony called Kong-shags (‘to clear the sins of all beings’ according to Ladakhi scholar Khanpo Konchok Phanday), is now held annually”.

For such rite the pyramid-like structure serves as an altar. This note clearly establishes a link to the context of the stupa cult and the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra which aims at purification from negative Karma accumulated through sinful behaviour. The practice of rites of the Pariśodhana Tantra is thereby aiming at preventing rebirth in an unfortunate realm, in particular to avoid rebirth in hell. Mandalas of this tantra are the most frequently found subject on the lantern ceilings of early passageway stupas in Ladakh.

Figure 7. Arial sketch perspective



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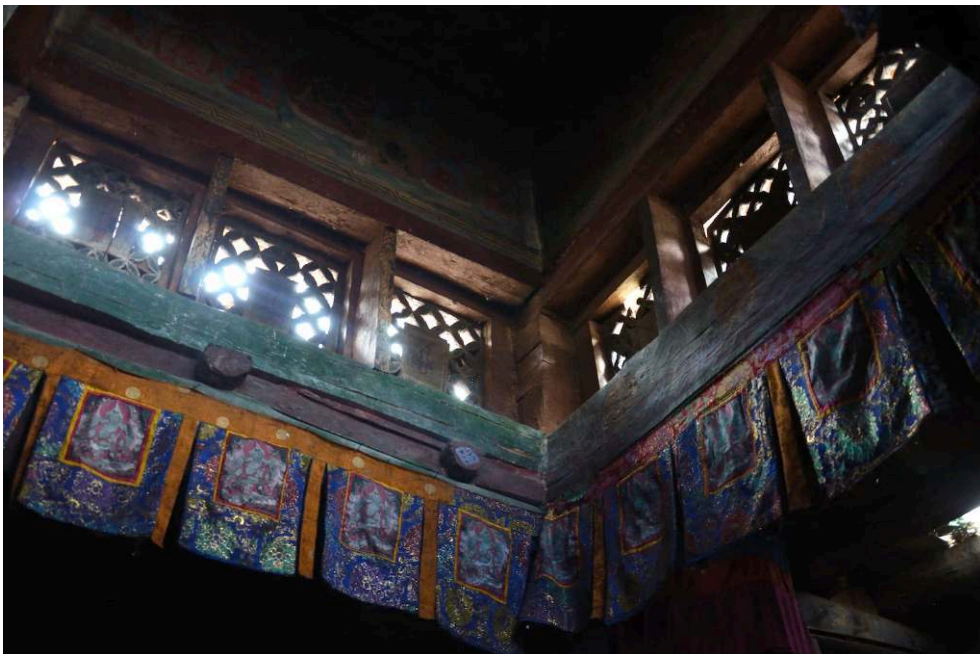
Figure 8. The wooden pyramid-like construction below the lantern



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- 8 Thangkas are hung on the pillars and musical instruments are kept on two rows of seats placed parallel to the main axis of the temple between the columns.

Figure 9. Backlight from above penetrating the hall through the latticework



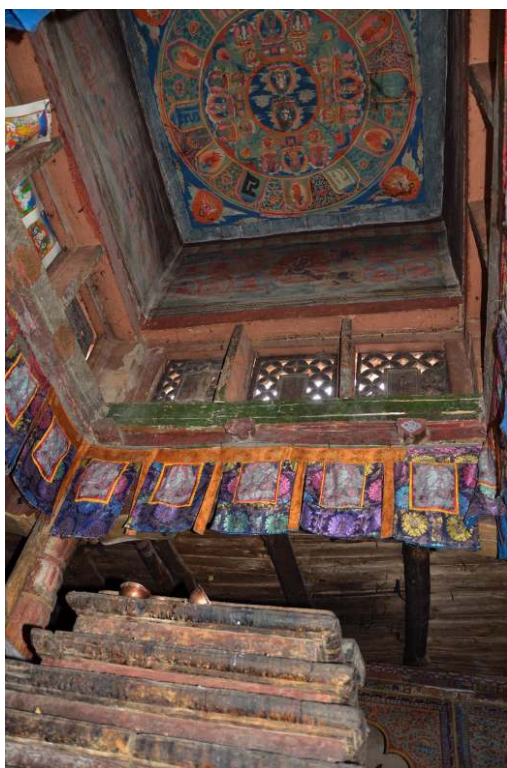
Note: the light near the right lower corner of the photograph results from a damage and hole in the roof

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- 9 The dimmed and soft nature of the light is due to an unusual table-like construction as the actual camber of the lantern is not directly placed upon the ceiling but sort of

“elevated” by four wooden supports placed in the corners. Between the columns wooden panels with latticework allow indirect, soft light from all directions into the space (fig. 9). Given the high Himalayan daylight factor, even this creates too much backlight, and the glare blurs the sight of the actual content of the ceiling. Only additional artificial interior light allows for the visual experience of the iconographic programme of the central subject of this temple: the “zhitro” mandala of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities (fig. 10). The mandala again centres on the 42 Peaceful Deities arranged in a circular order on the ceiling (fig. 11). In the very central circle Samantabhadra and his consort Samantabhadrī are placed “above” – with respect to the main axis of the mandala – Vairocana and Ākāśadhātviśvarī. They are surrounded by the four Directional Buddhas, all embracing their consorts. Each of the directional couples is flanked by two bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) and two offering deities. The whole arrangement is embedded in a four-pedalled lotus structure which is encircled by a plane dedicated to the Six Saints and Nine Letters in Lantsa script. Again, all single figures and letters are placed inside lotus petals.

Figure 10. View into the lantern centring on the full cycle of the *zhitro* mandala



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Figure 11. Close-up of the centre of the central mandala configuration depicting the arrangement of the 42 Peaceful Deities on the ceiling



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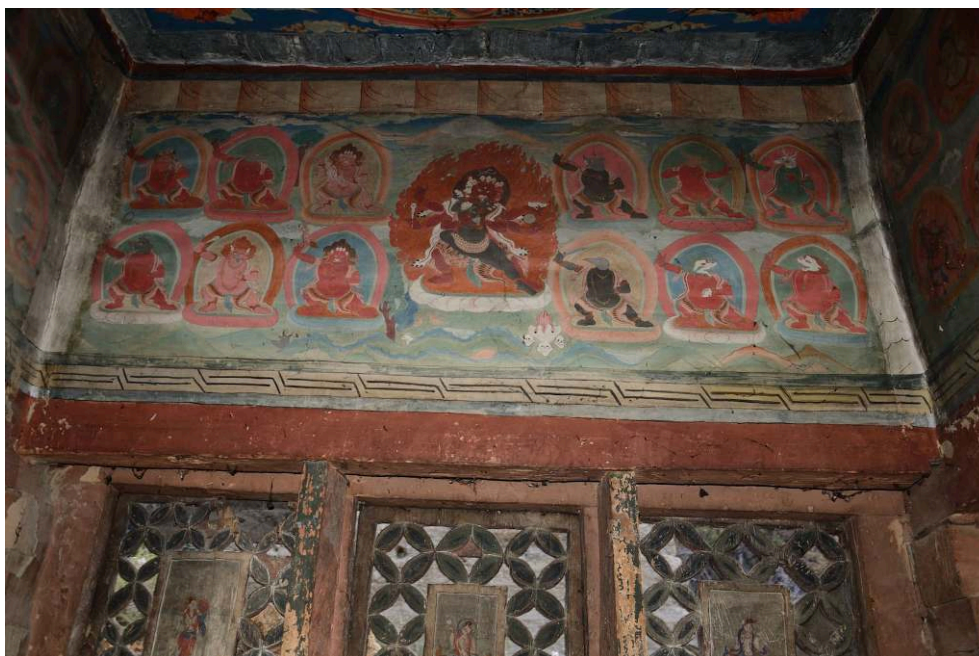
- 10 Remarkably, the four gate keepers are placed in the corner areas of the ceilings square. A striking feature of this mandala is the absence of all pseudo-architectural elements despite the centric composition. A visual reference to the classical square-circle geometry was created by a green landscape imagery background and a blue colour for the sky. Thereby, the Buddhas in the very central circle seem to float in the blue sky as if seen through a round hole in the ceiling. The whole composition is identical to the ceiling of the Hunder stupa except for the Lantsa letters. By contrast, the arrangement of the wrathful deities differs significantly from the order displayed at Hunder. First of all, this is due to the different shape of the fields. While the walls of the Hunder stupa are almost of square form, the shape of the walls of the lantern at Sumur is a “landscape” horizontal rectangle. Further, at Hunder the two additional Herukas are placed in facing positions to the South and North¹⁰ while at Sumur both additional Herukas are placed on the western wall which is the direction towards the entrance and the valley (figs 12, 13). The result is a significant difference regarding the internal visual balance between Hunder and Sumur. While the overall arrangement at Hunder reflects a symmetric order, the need for additional space on the western wall at Sumur creates a chain reaction of shifts of figures which finally results in gaps and new space for additional deities¹¹. The new positions among the wrathful deities were then given to Śākyamuni, Padmasambhava and the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi. All these additional deities do not belong to the original cycle¹².

Figure 12. Vajra Heruka of the East embracing Vajrakrodheśvarī flanked by the two additional Herukas and their partners, and surrounded by his complete entourage plus Śākyamuni in the top centre and the two Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi



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Figure 13. Padma Heruka who heads the western sector and his entourage



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- 11 One detail of the lantern that might be easily missed, also because of the back light, are *ḍākinī* (female spirit)-like dancers on small boards in the centers of the latticework elements. Again, similar female figures can also be found on the *shingsag* construction in the Hunder Zimskhang.

The hall

Figure 14. Central triad of the rear wall centring on Padmasambhava



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- 12 The atmospheric use of natural light and the whole scenery immediately draw attention to the central area of the hall and the nine-storied, wooden pyramid. Thereby the iconographic content of the walls is automatically put in a secondary, subordinate position – even the rear wall where a clay sculpture of Padmasambhava on an elaborate lotus throne is flanked by Buddha Śākyamuni to his right and the lion-faced Simhamukhā to his left (fig. 14). Towards the corners the sculptures of another two wrathful guardians of the Faith, Hayagrīva and Vajrapāṇi, were placed. At least these two protectors seem to be later additions to the temple's programme as on the wall behind Vajrapāṇi the original mural displaying a large-size wrathful form of blue Vajrapāṇi/Vajrasattva embracing his white consort has survived without any significant damage (fig. 15). The fierce aspect of this couple is underlined by the dynamic posture with the male deity's right leg not only bent but also placed on a higher position upon a subdued figure than the extended left leg. The flaming aureole is dramatically protruding towards the corner and the hair as well – and so are the entrails which the deity wears as a scarf. By contrast, the original mural behind Hayagrīva has been completely wiped out.

Figure 15. The modern Vajrapāṇi in front of the original mural depicting Vajrapāṇi/Vajrasattva and consort



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- 13 Compared to the visual impact of the lantern ceiling, which is also caused by the compact arrangement of deities, the lateral walls of the hall in a way appear incomplete or repainted just like the rear wall. They are primarily dedicated to a set of wrathful deities with a small number of small figures in between. The greyish background reminds one of an empty screen. Normally, Buddhist temples of all eras in Ladakh and neighbouring regions are densely filled, sometimes even visually overloaded, with iconographic content. Such density is usually even more enhanced and intensified by a blue, green, red or even – in the case of “chapels of protective deities” (*gonkhangs*, Tib. *mgon khang*) – black background. Thus, the widely greyish white background is an unexpected feature. Only a thin strip of blue sky – again in pastel – and a small greenish stripe of green landscape support the assumption that this had been a deliberate aesthetic choice and the result of a programmatic decision. To anyone familiar with the general visual language of western Himalayan Buddhism the large portion of undecorated areas with at first sight triggers the impression that something is missing or incomplete. The common practice of presenting wrathful content with black background creates an even sharper contrast to the white colour in the hall of the Sumur Onpo Lhakhang and its second main iconographic subject easily identifiable by the wings projecting from their bodies: the Eight Pronouncement Heruka of the Atiyoga. With their identification the over-all programme of the iconography of the temples immediately takes shape: According to Jeff Watt the Eight Pronouncement Heruka is one of the two principal systems of the early Nyingmapa Tradition, the other one being the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful deities. In addition, Watt mentions the meditational forms of Padmasambhava as the – albeit later – third category of deity meditation types¹³. Now, inside the hall each lateral wall is occupied by a set of four of the whole group. The line-up exactly follows the list given in the texts but regarding the spatial positions the order appears to be confused at first sight as it starts with

Yamāri, followed by red Hayagrīva who is easily identified due to the green horse head on top of the hair-do, then Śriheruka and Vajrāmṛta (fig. 16). The sequence is perfectly correct, but strangely it starts at the rear right corner next to the wrathful Vajrapāṇi/Vajrasattva mentioned above, which is also the south-eastern corner of the hall. This is to the left of the main axis and the centre and therefore the minor side.

Figure 16. Yamāri and red Hayagrīva with three horse heads emerging from the hair-do



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- 14 The order – if following the hierarchy given by the numbers – should start to the right side of the centre. However, this shift of the first group of four Herukas to the southern wall gives way to the No. Five in the list, Vajrakīla, to be placed in this eminent position (fig. 17). This move is very conclusive as each Heruka is also representative of a theological aspect and a “great teacher” (Skt. *mahāsiddha*). In the case of Vajrakīla these are “activity” and Padmasambhava. Thus, placing Vajrakīla in this position means positioning the Heruka form related to the “Second Buddha” of the Nyingmapa Tradition as the *primus inter pares*. Vajrakīla stands out by the distinct way he holds the “ritual dagger” (Tib. *phurpa*) with both hands in front of his chest. In this specific variant inside the Onpo Lhakhang the dagger is not only held in the hands which the deity folds behind the back of his partner who is turned towards him. In addition to that, another dagger of significant size emerges from the united bodies of the couple. The couple itself visually transforms into the handle of the dagger and becomes the driving force of the dagger piercing the demon right underneath.

Figure 17. Vajrakīla



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- 15 The line-up on the northern wall is then completed by Mamo Botong (Mātarah), Jigten Choto (Lokastotrapūjā) and Mopa Dranag (Vajramantrabhiru). All the Herukas are clearly identifiable by their body colours and major attributes. One feature which all the Eight Herukas share is a star-shaped structures on which the lotus flowers from which they emerge are placed. These elements appear like fringes or an exploding white massif. The white surface displays a cloud-like pattern. The blue and green underlying structure produces some psychedelic soil or tablet for the whole imagery. These massifs now visually float above and in the foreground of the small band of green landscape creating the impression of the whole set of Heruka floating in the sky. The whole visual idiom is alien to the religious Buddhist art of the western Himalayan region. It reminds of a style which originates from a completely different region of the Tibetan cultural sphere, namely Eastern Tibet and is referred to as the Karma Encampment or Gadri Style¹⁴.
- 16 Even though every temple displays a certain hierarchy of elements based on an iconographic system which literally emerges from its centre, there is another practical and also functional concept which always reflects upon the composition of the spatial choreography: the internal circumambulation which starts when one enters the sanctum and ends at the same point. This choreography highlights the importance of the entrance wall or to be more precise: the three portions of the entrance area: (1) the section right above the gate, (2) the left side upon enter which is the start of the clockwise circumambulation and finally, (3) the right hand side upon enter which is where the ambulation practically ends. Since in the case of the Sumur Onpo Lhakhang the multi-layered *shingtsag* continues reached up to the ceiling level, there is no iconographic content above the gate. To left, which is the right side of the gate when viewed from the interior, the first deity encountered is Magzor Gyalmo (fig. 18). According to Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt (2004, pp. 168-171) her iconography is almost identical to the deity whose entourage she heads, namely Palden Lamo – the only

difference being the two arms versus the four arms of her mistress. Her attributes include the dice, a club, a ball of wool, bag of diseases and a skull cup. In this specific case she is even shown eating some flesh or brain from the skull cup which by underlining her gruesome appearance determines her potential for the ritual practice. Like Palden Lamo she rides a mule with an eye on its back and is seated on a human skin. Next to her right in the centre of this wall segment is Mahākāla Ṣaḍbhujā. His attributes are the sword, the trident and the skull cup. To his left two Nyingmapa masters are depicted.

Figure 18. Magzor Gyalmo



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- 17 The opposite section of the wall, where the circumambulation ends, centers again on two figures. Next to the door is another protector riding on a horse (fig. 19). Although his attributes are perfectly clear the identity of the figure is not clear – at least not from the iconography. The reason for this indefinite situation is due to the fact that this depiction exactly conforms to two different protectors: Tsi'u Marpo and Jagpa Melen. The later is a major guardian deity of the Drugpa branch of the Kargyu School of Tibetan Buddhism and serves the protective deity of the Thimbu valley of Bhutan. Naturally, this deity can also be found in various temples of that order. One *lhatho* dedicated to this deity protects the entrance to the valley below Hemis monastery. His significant features are his red body colour, the three flags on his helmet, the heart in his fangs held by the left hand, as well as the spear in his right to nail down a demon or demonic rider. The iconography of this deity is confirmed by a labeled depiction of this deity on a *thangka* in the Wise Collection¹⁵. The second deity who perfectly fits with this iconography is Tsi'u Marpo¹⁶. According to Nebesky- Wojkowitz, Tsi'u Marpo was an eminent protector of the Faith and was established as a protector of the earliest

monastic compound of Tibet, Samye monastery. Since this religious institution was established under the supervision of Padmasambhava and plays a central role in the monastic system of the Nyingmapa, it is certainly Tsi'u Marpo who is depicted here.

Figure 19. Tsi'u Marpo



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- 18 The figure next to him is just a final confirmation of the theological concept of the hall. The figure is standing in militant posture with the left leg extending, holding a trident in the right hand and performing the gesture of threatening and a skull cup in the left. The most intriguing feature are the blood-red eyes. From the lotus flower emerges a sort of smoke-like cloud, which has the shape of lotus pedals but then turns into a sort of scarf that softly winds around the body. It is impossible to tell from the physical appearance whether the figure is male or female. However, a distinctive feature, namely the upwards-pointing hair-do allows for the identification of the female guardian Ekajaṭī (fig. 20). In early tantric Buddhist iconography in India Ekajaṭī had been an emanation and one of the two regular attendants of the goddess Tārā, and she was absorbed into the Nyingma pantheon at a very early stage of the doctrinal development.

Figure 20. Ekajaṭī



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A protective bracket for the system

- 19 In a way Ekajaṭī may be understood as a sort of key figure in the overall context. In the glossary of his translation of the *Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*, Gyurme Dorje gives the explanation of a term which might be of significance for the understanding of the programme of this temple: Magon Chamdrel. According to Gyurme Dorje (2005, p. 485), Magon Chamdrel is an “epitaph of the protectress Ekajaṭī and Dorje Legpa, who are revered as the foremost supra-mundane protector deities, according to the Atiyoga tradition of Nyingma school”. It is the second figure which now attracts attention: Dorje Legpa (fig. 21). In addition to his wrathful appearance he is characterised by his specific attributes and his vehicle. According to the description provided by Linrothe and Watt, Dorje Legpa rides on a snow lion, brandishes a vajra (diamond thunderbolt) with his right arm performing the mudra (hand gesture) of threatening, bites into a heart just like Tsi’u Marpo. In addition, he wears the usual thick cloth of an indigenous Tibetan guardian deity and – literally above all – wears a comparatively big hat. This description exactly matches with the figure depicted at the facing wall of the structural support of the *lhatho* in the ante-room. If we understand the beginning of the religious experience which is also reflected by an actual path towards the centre and also the return to the mundane again, Dorje Legpa is placed exactly at the beginning of this process while Ekajaṭī is at the very end of it. The two most eminent protector deities of the Nyingmapa thereby form a supra-mundane bracket for the experience of the overall programme.

Figure 21. Dorje Legpa on the facing wall of the *lhatho* plinth of the ante-room



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The stupa and the *lhatho*

Figure 22. The stupa of the Enlightened Type which literally enshrines the lantern and the “zhitro” mandala



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- 20 Apart from this experience of the sophisticated internal programme, the Onpo Lhakhang also displays another functional layer which does not meet the eye of a

visitor to the hall. Walking around the whole temple one can easily get on the roof since the temple's rear part is completely built into the slope. It is not only a tremendous view one may find up there. The actual architectural topic at the roof, which is in a way to be expected but still quite a surprise, is the massive stupa built upon the already mentioned wooden corner supports of the lantern (fig. 22). Interestingly, several horizontal layers of short beams had been used to bear the load of the stupa¹⁷. Again, the “zhitro” mandala is enshrined in a stupa – just as in Hunder. And both stupas are of the Enlightenment Type of the Tibeto-Buddhist stupa tradition recalling the moment when Buddha overcame the obstacles and distractive attempts of the demon Māra and gained enlightenment at Bodhgaya. This centric placement of the stupa which is representative of the axis mundi through its vertical axis, confirms that the “zhitro” mandala must actually be understood as the ultimate centre of the temple's programme (fig. 23). In this regard the Hunder stupa and the Onpo Lhakhang are identical. Only in the case of the Onpo Lhakhang the programme was extended to comprise all the essential ideological and liturgical pillars of the meditational practice of the school within the architectural configuration.

Figure 23. Sectional sketch perspective of the Onpo Lhakhang



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- 21 At this point it is also worth recalling the pyramid-like structure below which has to be understood as another element of the central axis despite its slight shift to the rear. Since a relation with purification rituals has already been established, it might be considered as an extension or reflection of the essence of the stupa into the internal realm of the temple. It is also worth noting that both the *Pariśodhana* mandalas as well as the “zhitro” mandala are fundamentally related to the process of death, transition or passage, and rebirth. The Onpo Lhakhang not only comprises the teachings of the Nyingmapa, it thereby also deals with the fundamental questions of life and the beyond. The long-established relation between the stupa cult and the *Pariśodhana* Tantra is also in support of the hypothesis about a close relation between the stepped altar in the centre of the hall including the purification ceremony mentioned by Khanpo Konchok Panday and the lantern ceiling inside the stupa. What is striking is

that all the elements do so neatly fit into this overall concept and that the mastermind behind all that strictly avoided any additional content that might have blurred the concept.

- 22 Finally, the *lhatho* as well deserves a close inspection. It consists of a red stepped plinth and the usual final made of twigs and branches of juniper. The plinth has a chamber with two openings which are flanked by two facial motifs in high relief. One of the motifs has sort of antlers and reminds of a deer head while the other one displays anthropomorphic facial features. The visual impression however is rather that of a monkey's head than a human's¹⁸. Interestingly, the *lhatho* is directed to the south towards the passes that lead to Ladakh and further on to Tibet but not towards the Nubra valley. The juniper branches on top are held in position by a broad white textile band with Tibetan letters. Between the branches a dozen of arrows are stuck and fragments of the white ceremonial scarves (Tib. *khatak*), are attached to the twigs. In front of the cairn, a wooden pole decorated with prayer flags completes the set. The combination of a *lhatho* with a stupa is not unusual but due to the placement on the roof and the internal realm Onpo Lhakhang, this case certainly represents a unique configuration, both architectural and metaphysical.

Epilogue

- 23 In the evening of the first visit to the temple I could meet the present *onpo* of Sumur, Norbu Tsultim. Onpo Norbu Tsultim is also a highly respected amchi or traditional medical doctor. Accordingly, the first part of the meeting took place during his ambulation hours and the introductory talk happened while he was treating his patients. Only when the last patient had left he had a look at the line drawing of the “zhitro” mandala of Hunder which I had prepared in advance to discuss with him the identity of the very view deities whose iconographic features did not correlate with the text. Despite the short amount of time we had his explanations provided some unexpected pieces of information on the history of the Lhakhang. According to Onpo Norbu Tsultim, the temple had been founded two-hundred thirty years ago. That roughly conforms the date given in the NIRLAC inventory. But in addition to that, Onpo Norbu Tsultim stated that the temple had actually been built by a Nyingmapa lama from Central Tibet, to be more precise: from Mindrolling monastery, the most eminent Nyingmapa monastery of Central Tibet. That lama, whose name was not remembered at that moment or had even been forgotten, had been sent – or perhaps expelled? – by the then Dalai Lama from Tibet to Nubra. When the Nyingmapa lama came to Nubra he found a network of seven *onpo* families in the valley, all of which had lineages dating back to pre-Buddhist times. These families in some way established a cultural sphere in its own right over the valley since they naturally resided in different settlements: Sumur, Tagsha, Panamik Lagchung, Khardung, Hunder and Skuru. It may be assumed that the histories of those families were rooted in the pre-Buddhist religious stratum commonly summarized and referred to as Bon. Since the Bon traditions and the Nyingmapa share a common history, this might be the reason why the Nyingmapa lama could easily connect with this network and was then “invited” to establish the Sumur Onpo Lhakhang as the new centre of this network. The connection to Mindrolling that was thereby established certainly explains the unusual painting style of the murals

inside the hall¹⁹. The whole monument is a material condensation of all the essential doctrinal aspects of the Nyingmapa tradition and of its artistic tradition as well.

- 24 What remains strange is the fact that this exceptional implementation of the Nyingmapa doctrine centring on Sumur was somehow absorbed into the same underlying situation. Even more striking is the fact that, at Taktok in the Indus valley, the only Nyingmapa monastery of Ladakh, this Nyingmapa Tradition of Nubra is not recognized as such either. Even the official representatives of the school do not include the Nubra sites in their monastic network. The reasons for such an attitude are currently a matter of speculation. According to the *onpo*, the villagers are followers of the Gelugpa and all their religious activities centre on the Samstanling monastery of Sumur while the Onpo Lhakhang serves only as a private chapel.
- 25 When asked about the protector depicted on the basis of the *lhatho* inside the ante-hall, the *onpo* gave the name of Dorlak. Apparently, this is an abbreviation of Dorje Legpa. Interestingly, the *onpo* described Dorlak as a local protector with no Tibetan roots²⁰ (fig. 24). Whether the history of this protector had been simply absorbed into a local stratum or deliberately assimilated to escape notice by the dominant Gelugpa is difficult to ascertain. Since there is at least one more *lhatho* dedicated to this Nyingmapa protector near Diskit²¹, I assume that the Nyingmapa network of Nubra was not only based on the *onpo* families and the stupas containing the “zhitro” mandala. Their protector, too, was well embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the local community.

Figure 24. Eastern side of the *lhatho* with the opening flanked by two (mythical?) heads



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- 26 Nubra has been a border region of Tibetan and Buddhist culture for centuries. Perhaps it is this border situation that goes hand in hand with great distance to the centres of

power and control which provides the perfect soil for the establishment and continuity of such an exceptional development as the Sumur Onpo Lhakhang.

- 27 On my recent visit to the temple in October 2019 I was accompanied by the grandson of the *onpo*. While some parts of the roof had been repaired recently there were also signs of further decay and neglect. Even the daily prayer was not performed any more. It had become a weekly ceremony which hints at a slow process of falling into oblivion of the former centre of the Nyingmapa tradition in the Nubra valley.

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- 28 Research on this subject as well as the participation of the 2017 IALS Conference at Bedlewo were generously funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) through various stand-alone-projects (P21139, P25475 and P28509). I am deeply thankful to Diana Lange for sharing all her findings and photographs, and for allowing the reproduction of her material (labeled “DL”). I would also like to thank Heinrich Pöll and Quentin Devers for their comments and support throughout the editorial process.

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NOTES

1. The Onpo Lhakhang was brought to my attention by Diana Lange who visited the site in 2015. The photograph she took at that occasion showed the courtyard in a very similar state of construction activities.
2. *Onpo* is both the definition of the profession as astrologer and a title which becomes part of the name of the respective ritual specialist similar to doctor in the western context. *Onpos* are among the most important members of traditional Himalayan societies.
3. See e.g. Shakspo 1990, p. 101.
4. This stupa is listed as “Kagan” Chorten in the NIRLAC catalogue as well, but the nature of the mandala is neither discussed nor even identified (NIRLAC 2008, p. 109).
5. The first complete translation of the text was made by Gyurme Dorje and published in 2005 under the title *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation* (Gyurme Dorje 2005).
6. A mandala of this type was documented by Giuseppe Tucci (1988, pp. 123-140) at one of the temples of Chango in the Spiti valley. Unfortunately the photographs of the decayed murals were too bad for reproduction. During my visit to Chango in 2006 I noticed a complete repainting of the original murals with modern bright colours. Another “zhitro” mandala can be found in the Nyingmapa temple of Poo in the Sutlej valley. The most elaborate depiction inside a temple known to me was painted inside the Avalokiteśvara temple of Lamayuru. This temple and its mandala were discussed in detail by Kristin Blancke (2014, pp. 274-297).
7. The only other exception from this basic “1+4” rule known to me is the Satcakravartin mandala (Niṣpannayogāvalī 25) as e.g. displayed on the main wall of the Alchi Tsatsapuri stupa temple and one of the cave temples of Saspol (see Kozicz 2009, p. 61, fig. 6). However, that mandala represents a different, very distinct compositional concept.
8. Within a horizontal composition as represented e.g. inside the Lamayuru Avalokiteśvara temple this practically six-fold nature of the mandala posed no problem since the deities are displayed in a linear, non-centric order.
9. I am most thankful to John Harrison for sharing this information which is an excerpt from his forthcoming article (pers. communication, 12 January 2017). At Skurbuchan the structure seems to be of seven storeys.
10. This assessment is in accordance with the directions of the internal mandala order but not with the actual cardinal directions.
11. A detailed discussion of the different orders and a comparative study, which would also have to include the “zhitro” mandala inside the passageway stupa of Tirid, is beyond the scope of this essay. That third mandala was also brought to my attention by Diana Lange and then fully documented in the course of the 2016 field research literally in passing on the way from Hunder to Sumur.

12. For lists of deities see Gyurme Dorje's translation and detailed list of all the deities as well as the manuscripts edited by Giuseppe Tucci and published in his *Indo-Tibetica* (Tucci 1988, pp. 125-135). With a very few exceptions the mandalas in Nubra represent the 100 deities as listed by Gyurme Dorje.

13. See Jeff Watt www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=276 (accessed 24 November 2017).

14. For a description of the Gadri Style and its history see Linrothe & Watt 2004, pp. 107-108, Cat. no. 3, a 19th century thangka showing Draglha Gonpo. The background displays the same bright colours and stylistic features. Also, the deity's lotus pedestal is placed on a star-like shelf which resembles a green plateau on a rocky cliff.

15. I would like to thank Diana Lange for sharing this information with me. The thangka shows Jagpa Melen as an attendant of Shabdrung, the Drugpa master who established this school as the state religion of Bhutan (Lange 2020, p. 22, fig. 3.1).

16. See e.g. Watt 2000. I thank Nils Martin for bringing this to my attention. However, it has to be noted that the iconography of Tsi'u Marpo as shown on the thangka on the *Himalayan Art Website* deviates from the description by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956, p. 167).

17. The same construction method can be found at the mosque at Turtuk further down the Shyok (NIRLAC 2008, p. 382). I would like to thank Quentin Devers for bringing this to my attention and for sharing his photograph of the building.

18. The depiction of heads in high relief is a feature noticed elsewhere in Nubra but not in other places of Ladakh so far. According to the current stage of surveys of *lhathos* in Ladakh, such facial depictions appear only on red *lhatho* cairns, never on white shrines.

19. I am inclined to assume that the paintings were even carried out by that lama. The major argument in favour of such a hypothesis is the fact that there are no other murals of that style known to me in Ladakh. If the lama had been accompanied by a workshop there would have certainly been works by the same artists at other sites as well.

20. The transfer of Central Tibetan territorial guardians and protectors to Ladakh is a widespread phenomenon. The best known examples include Rongtsen, the protector of the Sakya sites in Ladakh, and Nezer Gyalpo, the protector of Gelugpa sites in the area around Leh. For Rongtsen see Pascale Dollfus' 2006 article and for Nezer Gyalpo see Kozicz 2017, 243-244, fig. 20)

21. NIRLAC 2008, p. 77. This *lhatho* was severely damaged by recent flooding. I would like to thank Teresa Raffelsberger for searching and finally locating the cairn which was in rubbles in 2017.

ABSTRACTS

For more than two hundred years, the Nubra valley of Ladakh has been pervaded by a socio-religious network that is related to the Nyingmapa tradition and existed beside the large-scale monastic system of the dominant Gelugpa. This system manifested itself in a two-fold manner. First, through a selected group of families whose members were "astrologers" (Tib. *onpos*) and sometimes also "traditional medical practitioners" (Tib. *amchis*). Second, the system took shape through a number of stupas which shared a specific iconographic topic: the "zhitro" mandala. In the center of the system was – and still is – the Onpo Lhakhang of Sumur.

Depuis plus de deux cents ans, la vallée de la Nubra au Ladakh est traversée par un réseau socioreligieux affilié à la tradition Nyingmapa, existant aux côtés du vaste système monastique Gelugpa dominant. Ce réseau se manifeste de deux manières. Premièrement, à travers un groupe

de familles dont les membres étaient des « astrologues » (tib. *onpos*) et parfois aussi des « médecins traditionnels » (tib. *amchis*). Deuxièmement, le réseau a pris forme à travers un certain nombre de stupas qui partagent un programme iconographique particulier : le mandala *zhi khro*. Au centre de ce système se trouvait – et se trouve toujours – le temple Onpo Lhakhang de Sumur.

INDEX

Mots-clés: nyingma, mandala, stupa, astrologue, Nubra

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