

EXPLICATIONS DETAILLEES
SUR LES PEINTURES ET STATUES
QUI ORNENT LA GOMPA DE CHUDZONG
(MUSTANG - NEPAL)

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Wall Paintings of Meditative Deities from the Mahāyoga Tantra in an Ancient Cave Temple in Upper Mustang

During their earlier visits, late Dzongsar Ngari Chödje Thingo Rinpoche and S.v.d.Heide had rediscovered near the Tibetan border a complex of various temple sites, some hewed out of the rock. Exceptional wall paintings probably dating back to the late 11th, beginning of the 12th and the 14th century were found, the iconographical features of which are common to the Kadam, the Sakya and Drukpa Kagyu traditions (Pl. 1).

Studies were subsequently carried out to sift through the art-historical evidence of early Buddhist wall and ceiling paintings in ancient cave temples throughout Upper Mustang (most of which are now threatened by decay), document them and ascertain relations among them.

I shall introduce three different sites within the present monastic complex, which is called Chödzung (*chos rdzung*), 'Stronghold of Dharma'. It contains paintings from different centuries that are seemingly under the influence of different schools, as witnessed by, among other things, how Tantrik themes are treated.

WRITTEN HISTORY

Of particular interest for the history of Chödzung is a ting-yig (*spring yig*) – a written message – dating from the 13th century that Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche was able to examine at the palace of Lo Manthang. This document refers to the cave temple site and identifies it as being affiliated to the Kadam and Sakya traditions. The message itself was written by King Bumde gön, the influential ruler of Gungthang (Bum lde, 1253-1280).

In the message, he orders that puja ceremonies should henceforth always be carried out in Chödzung in honour of Lama Sharawa Yonten Dakpa (1070–1141), a famous Tibetan master of the Kadampa school, originally from Zho, who according to the ting-yig had stayed for three months in the holy temple of Chödzung when he could not proceed further due to high water blocking his way.

Lama Sharawa Yonten Dakpa's teacher was the well known Potoba (1031-1106), an abbot of the Radeng Monastery, and one of the three important disciples of the famous Kadampa Master Domtönpa (1004-1064), who himself was a disciple of the great Kadampa-

Master Atīśa (982-1054). Atīśa had been in Mustang on his way to visit Purang-Guge at the invitation of Yeshe Ö and Byang chub Ö, as Ngari Thingo Rinpoche, citing a biography on Marpa (1012-1097), noted.¹

Therefore it can be assumed that a Kadampa temple already had been established at Chödzung during the 11th century, either before or after the visit of Lama Sharawa Yonten Dakpa. That would accord with the dating of the wall paintings at the first discovered site of the Chödzung monastic complex to the late 11th or early 12th century. Indeed, it is possible that this Kadampa temple site was erected soon after the visit of Atīśa to Mustang in 1041 on his way to Purang-Guge, as Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche inferred on the basis of documentary evidence. This may be why Lama Sharawa Yonten Dakpa preferred to stay at Chödzung to wait until the water level of the river went down.

Just how highly the lama was esteemed - even more than hundred years later - and presumably the Kadampa School as a whole as well - is attested by King Bumde-gön's written order to carry out puja ceremonies at the Chödzung temple.

Lo Manthang along with the neighbouring areas of Dolpo and Manang was ruled during the 13th century by the Gunghang king Bumde-gön, who had attained power mainly with the backing of the great Sakya master Phagpa (1235-1280), who was the religious and secular ruler of Tibet during that time, and the Mongolians. The Gunghang rulers were in fact related to the Sakya Khön family.

It may be noted, finally, that Padmasambhava is said to have visited the site where Chödzung later stood on his way to Tibet, and a rock with the imprint of his head can still be seen there.²

ATĪŚA'S INFLUENCE IN MUSTANG

Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche cited a biography of Marpa³ that reports that Atīśa travelled to Guge via the old trade route through Upper Mustang and met Marpa there when the latter was serving the great Tibetan scholar NyöLotsawa (*gnyos lo*)⁴ in Garphu (Gerphu) and Nyephu. We know that during his three-year stay in Purang-Guge Atīśa had a disciple from Lo with him whose name was Lama Tönpa Yangrab (*ston pa yang rab*), and who later became well known throughout West Tibet.⁵

1. See *mar lo rnam thar dad pa 'i my gu*, Fo. 36, 4-6 and find explanations in the next chapter

2. concerning the life of Padmasambhava see Essen and Thingo /Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 1991

3. *Mar lo rnam thar mthong ba don yod*, fol. 9r, 19 and fol. 10v, 1-9

4. short for *gnyos lo tsā ba*

5. see Roerich 1996: 262; Dhungel 2002: 49

It is interesting that before his journey to Purang-Guge via Mustang Atīśa, who is described as a talented artist, had spent around one year in the Kathmandu Valley. There he met different sculptors and other artists, many of whom were influenced by Indian Pālā art.⁶ It can therefore be assumed that Atīśa paved the way for the diffusion of Indian Pālā art in West Tibet and for Nepalese artists to visit the prosperous kingdom of Purang-Guge.

We know now that the great Buddhist masters Atīśa, Marpa and Milarepa (1040-1123)⁷ and the even earlier master Rinchen Zangpo⁸ had all spent some time during the 11th century in the Lo Mustang region, in some cases on their way to Purang-Guge. They all contributed to a renaissance of Buddhism set in motion by the king and later Lama Yeshe Ō and his nephew Jangchub Ō, who continued the legacy of his uncle.⁹

This had an enormous impact on the neighbouring areas of Purang-Guge and Mustang, Mustang being the southernmost region to which the Buddhist revival spread. Monasteries and temples from different Buddhist schools were founded. Famous Buddhist scholars from the Nyingma and Kadampa traditions, and from the Sakya and Kagyu schools as well, travelled to or from West Tibet through Mustang, or else through other regions (e.g. Ladakh, Kinnaur or Spiti) on their way to Purang-Guge, which controlled almost all these areas during the 10th and 12th centuries.

It was during this time of prosperity and change under fresh impulses from mainly West Tibet, but also from the Kathmandu Valley, that the Chödzung monastic complex seems to have been founded, followed by the construction of chapels and temples, which continued to be erected even after the 12th century.

THE OLDEST SITE IN CHÖDZONG

The oldest paintings of the site were found below the main complex in a fragmentarily preserved grotto (Pl. 2), which probably originally formed part of a small temple. Both the walls and roof of this temple, the whole of which tapers upward pyramidally, are furnished with paintings. In the upper portion is portrayed what is presumably a scholar of the Buddhist

6. see Martin 2001, 142-144

7. Milarepa also had visited Mustang and stayed there one year on his way to lake Mānāsārovar, as Ngari Thingo Rinpoche found in one of the biographies written on Milarepa (*mi la ras pa'i rnam* 1999, 365-369).

8. see Klimburg-Salter 1997: 34

9. see Vitali 1996

Kadampa school,¹⁰ as one can infer from the form and colour of his headgear. In the lower portion appear the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara, Amitāyus and Vajrapāṇi. The paintings can be dated to the end of the 11th or beginning of the 12th century, and thus are the oldest images found at the complex (Pl. 3)

THE MAIN COMPLEX: ENTRANCE HALL, LHAKHANG AND THE TEMPLE DEDICATED TO INITIATORY AND PROTECTIVE DEITIES

A bit above the site of the first discoveries can be found the main temple of the Chödzung complex (Pl. 4) including an attached temple dedicated to initiatory and protective deities (*srung ma*). The temple is crowned by a pyramid-like vault, which leads over to a complex of caves that are no longer accessible. The front side of the temple consists of layers of stone and earth, while the backside of the complex gives way to the preponderance of conglomerate found in the cave complex. This cliff cave site can be assigned to the Buddhist Drukpa Kagyu tradition. The main building contains an entrance hall, along with a *lha khang*, and towards the back, a temple dedicated to initiatory and protective deities that is connected to the *lha khang* by a narrow, very low corridor. The entrance hall of the main temple is about 5.50m long and 1.50m wide. Along the sides the entrance to the *lha khang*, to the right and left, there are wall paintings with images of the Lokapālas, protectors of the cardinal directions.

To the right are Virūpākṣa, protector of the west, and Vaiśravaṇa, protector of the north. To the left are Virūdhaka, protector of the south (his image has faded), and Dhṛitarāstra, protector of the east.

On the right-hand wall is also depicted a Wheel of Life (bhavacakra). On the left-hand wall there are barely recognizable images of Buddha

Śākyamuni and Buddha Amitāyus surrounded by long life symbols. The wall paintings date from a more recent period, and were coated with a protein-based glaze, which led to the early decay of the motifs. Originally there were probably older paintings in the entrance hall, which were then later painted over. The wall paintings in the *lha khang* should also be assigned a more recent date.

It is said that a number of lamas lived at the site 60 to 80 years ago and made an attempt to restore some of the old paintings. Canonical writings have been placed on a pedestal next to the corridor in the rear part of the *lha khang*. Next to the pedestal is the altar area, with

10. The Kadampa tradition is an early Buddhist school that arose parallel with the Nyingma. Its doctrines were passed on down through the Sakyapas and, more importantly, the Gelugpa schools. Besides, the Kadam teachings were also introduced into the Kagyü schools through Gampopa.

its butter lamps, *tsha tsha* (votive earthen offerings), and statues. To the right of it the empty seat of the abbot of Chödzhong draws immediate attention. His ritual drum still hangs above his seat. Other ritual instruments, such as an oboe (*rgya gling*) and bone trumpet (*rkang gling*) can be seen. The ceremonial implements and the fixtures of the *lha khang* indicate the former presence of monks, who gathered here to perform rituals in common. Visible inside a wooden case in the centre of the altar area are, from left to right, Vajradhara sitting on a lotus throne, a *tsha tsha* next to him (meant as a votive offering), the Bodhisattva Padmapāni in a standing position to the right of it, and finally a statue of the Green Tara.

Other figures are located on top of the wooden case: from left to right, Padmasambhava, in the middle next to him a statue of the Bodhisattva Śadakṣarī-Avalokiteśvara, and to the very right a statue of a scholar.

On a pedestal shelf that extends along the wall there is an approximately 1 m high statue of the Buddha Sākyamuni centrally positioned above the altar area, and flanked by two small Sākyamuni sculptures, 80 cm and 55 cm in height. To the right of the central figure there is a statue of Maitreya, some 90 cm, followed by a smaller Buddha Sākyamuni, ca. 75 cm high. The five statues can be dated to the 16th or 17th century.

On the wall behind the altar area are seen scholars from the tradition of the Kagyu School. The paintings on the right-hand side represent, starting at the altar and moving towards the front entrance, first of all Padmasambhava, flanked by the Yidam Guru Dragpo and Dākiñī Simhamukha. These are followed by the 42 peaceful deities of the Mandala of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities (*zhi khro'i dkyil 'khor*), in the middle of who are the Ādi-Buddha Samantabhadra, flanked by the Tathāgatas Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, Akṣobhya and Ratnasambhava, each in union with his female partner. In the *lha khang* entrance area, on the sidewall to the right, are paintings containing depictions of a local *tsen* protective deity (*btsan*) along with the protective deity Caturbhuja-Mahākāla. On the left-hand side of the entrance are wall paintings displaying the protective goddess.

Śrī Devī (*dpal ldan lha mo*) astride her mule, and next to her the raven-headed Dharmapāla Kākamukha. These paintings are followed on the left-hand wall (as seen from the entrance) by the 58 wrathful deities of the Mandala of 100 Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, with Śrī Mahā-Heruka in the middle. Next to them is the image of the Buddha Sākyamuni, flanked by two of his favourite disciples and surrounded by the 35 Buddhas of Confessions of guilt.

THE TEMPLE OF THE INITIATORY AND PROTECTIVE DEITIES (*SRUNG MA*) IN THE MAIN BUILDING

Passing through a low, narrow corridor about 1 m long, one reach the pitch-black, cave-like room of 'protective deities', some 3.40 m × 3.35 m. In contrast to the *lha khang*, it tapers in the manner of a pyramid towards the ceiling. Imposing wall and ceiling paintings representing meditation deities of the highest Tantrik level (Mahāyoga Tantra), lineage-holders of the various Tibetan schools and Mahāsiddhas are complemented by six painted earthen/clay figures, some of them life-size, representing protective deities of the Tibetan pantheon. What is unusual about these deities is the fact that they are placed in a random configuration in the temple.

On a stone pedestal in front of the wall along the right-hand side of the corridor stands a painted earthen sculpture of Vaiśravaṇa, ca. 75 cm high. In front of it is a wooden box, in which butter lamps were probably once kept, along with a stone slab for receiving offerings brought during worship.

The central figure in the middle of the temple is a fully rounded earthen statue of the four-armed wrathful Caturbhuja-Mahākāla. About 180 cm high, he is sitting on a lotus, and surrounded by his retinue (Pl. 5). Among the retinue are, situated in front of him to the right and left, and next to the right-hand wall, three figures of Karma-Mahākāla Kakamukha (the raven-headed god), each approximately 160 cm tall, and each represented in a posture and with a hand gesture of his own (Pl. 6). Further, to the left and right in front of the central figure are the lion-headed Dharmapāla Simhavaktra (appr. 160 cm) and a local *tsen* (*btsan*) demon (appr. 170 cm), who is featured here as a protective deity (Pl. 7). These two figures, too, also are part of Caturbhuja's retinue. The age of these sculptures is very difficult to determine, given that they have been painted over in places. It appears in any case that the Caturbhuja-Mahākāla and the three versions of the raven-headed deity were sculpted at the same time as the wall paintings of the meditation deities, dating from the 14th century, that surround them. Dharmapāla Simhavaktra and the *tsen* protective god are amateurish works in comparison with the other figures, and could not have been produced in the same epoch as the wall paintings. An approximately 70 cm-tall statue set on the floor close to the right-hand wall represents the great yogi and poet Milarepa.

The cult room is adorned with wall paintings of the deities of the Mahāyoga Tantra, which suggests that originally initiations and other rituals associated with these deities were performed here. Both stylistically and technically, these paintings compare favourably with a number of the images in the Sumtsek of Alchi Monastery in Ladakh, which were produced much earlier (around 1200). Besides, there are several resemblances with wall paintings of different images at the Śadakṣarī chapel, north wall, at the Shalu Monastic complex in Tibet, dated to the early

14th century¹¹: the patterns of the fabrics worn by Avalokiteśvara and Rahula, for example, appear very similar to the cloths of the protective deities of the murals at the *srung ma* in Chōdzong. Whereas the paintings along the entrance wall have decayed to the point where only fragments are left, the meditation deities of the Mahāyoga Tantra can easily be made out in their rich tones along the left and right side walls and along the front wall of the building. Each of them is surrounded by a mandorla, parts of which consist of flame-like floral elements.

A frieze below the ceiling leads around the entire cult room. It displays images of scholars, Mahāsiddhas and Bodhisattvas, above who is situated an ornamental slat embellished with double flounces (*phur ma*) in imitation of a Tibetan curtain. A frieze running around the whole room is likewise visible beneath the images. It displays representations of the retinues of the meditation deities depicted above it. One can estimate that the cult room was originally fitted out with a total of 15 images of meditation deities. Only the first four representations to the right wall - when looking towards the front - can still be identified. These are the Tantrik meditation deities Buddhakapāla (Pl. 8), Vajrasattva Yogamvara (Pl. 9) and, presumably, the sixteen-armed Cakrasamvara (Pl. 10) together with Hevajra (Pl. 11) each in union with his female partner.

Along the front are depicted, from right to left, the meditation deities Kalācakra (Pl. 12), Dakasagara-Samvara, Vajradhātu (Pl. 13) and Guhyasamāja (Pl. 14), all in union with their partners.

On the left-hand wall, looking from the rear back towards the entrance, there are only three meditative deities, since the fourth one has decomposed. They are the buffalo-headed Vajrabhairava and two images from the series of Pañcakūla-Yamāntakas (Pl. 15): first Vajra-Yamāntaka (Pl. 16) and then Padma Yamāntaka, each united with his partner.

The iconographic adornment of the space beneath the dome is devoted to images of the lineage-holders of the various Tibetan schools and to images of Mahāsiddhas, all of them surrounded by life-like floral motifs that fill up the vault of the dome. Unfortunately, the paintings in the vault of the dome that are located above the entrance wall- have been completely destroyed, along with a large surface above the left-hand sidewall. The best-preserved image is that of a scholar, perhaps the son of Khön Khönochog Gyalpo (1034–1102), Sachen Kūnga Nyingpo (1092–1158), the first of the five Sakya hierarchs and the third to occupy the throne of the Sakya line (Pl. 17).

He is surrounded by other famous scholars of the Sakya tradition: under him to the right, presumably, Phagpa Lodrö Gyaltsen (1235–1280), the religious and secular ruler of Tibet

11. See Neumann, 2001, 40

during the Yuan period; and above the latter, portrayed in somewhat smaller size, the Mahāsiddha Virūpa. Below and to the left of the central figure of Sachen Kūnga Nyingpo, we can make out, on the basis of his appearance, what is possibly the figure of Sakya Pandita (1182–1251), the most important scholar of the Sakya tradition, and who was so esteemed that he was summoned to the Mongolian court. Above him, and again portrayed in a smaller size, is what seems to be the image of Khön Könchog Gyalpo, the founder of the Sakya school. Over the front side, the central image beneath the vault of the dome is probably that of the Ādi-Buddha Vajradhara, which has suffered much damage. He is flanked below and to his right by a scholar, no longer identifiable, above whom another smaller depiction of the Mahāsiddha Virūpa can be seen. Judging by his headgear, the scholar to the left of Vajradhara may be a lineage-holder of the Kagyu School. Under him to the left is a small figure together with a representation of an unidentified Mahāsiddha.

The paintings under the vault of the dome above the left-hand side wall have all been destroyed except for what is probably an image of the important translator Ngog (*rngog*) Lotsawa (1059–1109) off to the far right, towards the front wall. He is also called Loden Sherab¹², as an inscription that still needs to be accurately read testifies to. The vault of the ceiling can only have been painted after the 11th century, as proved by the type of clothing worn by the scholars. The great Indian master Atīśa introduced this type of clothing for the upper body during his sojourn in Tibet.

THE SMALL INITIATORY TEMPLE ABOVE THE MAIN COMPLEX

The small initiation temple in the uppermost part of the complex of Chödzhong was accessible only with special gear, along a vertiginous path. Other cave temple sites and monks' cells above it are no longer within reach. Scholars have more or less been faced with a scene of desolation. Hardly one of the impressive paintings of Tantrik meditation deities, Bodhisattvas and what are probably Sakya scholars - still had recognizable facial features. These figures seem to have been wilfully destroyed, but no one was able to supply any relevant information.

The cave-like cult room hewn out of the cliff - approximately 2 × 3 m - is completely open at the front, the entrance having been destroyed, and what remains having been exposed to the elements. Five representations are identifiable, virtually all on the right-hand sidewall or along the front. A few fragments can be found on the left-hand wall, but there is only one figure that of a deity, which is still relatively intact; all the other images no longer exist. It is no longer possible to reconstruct how the temple site was originally laid out.

12. *rNgog Lo tsā ba* = the translator (*lo tsā ba*) from the *rNgog* clan. Loden Sherab (blo ldan shes rab) is his ordination name.

To the right, at the open entrance, the Buddha Amitābha and his retinue can be made out (Pl. 18). Bodhisattvas and scholars, presumably of the Sakya tradition, surround him (Pl. 19). Next to them is the image of Sarvavid Vairocana (Pl. 20) sitting on a lotus throne and surrounded by 37 deities of the retinue from his Mandala. Clearly drawn outlines are visible only on a few images in the cult room, which gives rise to the assumption that the lines were later retraced. The colours red, black and ochre, being more resistant to weathering, are better preserved than, say, the colour blue.

In the middle of the right-hand wall towards the back is a central image, probably that of Sachen Kūnga Nyingpo or Domtōnpa, flanked by two no longer identifiable lamas, one of them being probably Atīśa with a Stūpa in hands (Pl. 21) and surrounded by masters of the Sakya tradition whose faces are no longer identifiable either (Pl. 22). Above Kunga Nyingpo, and below the vault of the ceiling, is the image of what is presumably the Ādi-Buddha Vajradhara (Pl. 23), who, in spite of the destruction, has what appear to be a bell and a vajra in his hands, surrounded by floral motifs.

On the front wall is the twelve-armed meditation god Cakrasamvara, in union with his female partner and surrounded by a flame-like mandorla. He, though like the images above him of what appear to be masters belonging to the Sakya tradition, is almost completely unrecognizable. The last identifiable image, located on the left-hand wall, is that of the sixteen-armed Hevajra in union with his partner (Pl. 24). He is surrounded probably by masters belonging to the initiatory tradition of the Sakya School. On this wall, too, alongside floral ornamentation of an archaic appearance, are flame-like floral motifs, but these are only fragmentarily preserved. The remaining paintings on the left-hand wall have by now fallen victim to erosion and weathering.

To judge by the style and colour scheme, the paintings in the cult room cannot have been produced later than the 13th century; and probably not even later than the end of the 12th.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The studies Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author carried out at the cliff cave site of Mentsun Lhakhang¹³ and the discovery of the cave temples of Dragrangjung, Könchog¹⁴ and now Chōdzong, have cast new light on aspects of the continuous development of early Buddhist art in Mustang from the 11th century on, at a time when it was under the influence

13. set forth in a recent public lecture in Sikkim at the Namgyal Institute for Tibetology in 2008, which will be published in 2010

14. also introduced by the author in Sikkim in 2008a

of Purang-Guge rule in West Tibet. Many scholars on their way to or from Guge and Purang passed through Lo Mustang, the southernmost border district of the area of Western Tibet rule, and often remained there for extended spells. In the following period, under their influence, new temple sites arose along with monastic complexes that contain impressively painted cult rooms and precious ornamentation.

Artists came from far and wide to do commissioned work there, and local workshops also seem to have come up. Hardly anything is known, however, about these early masters in Mustang, their use of paints and other techniques. It remains for other scholars to broaden the little knowledge that this article is meant to provide.

In any case, we can now better understand how a spiritual and cultural centre of Buddhists was able to develop so quickly following the founding of the kingdom of Mustang by King Amepal in the 15th century, inasmuch as a firm basis for it had been laid long before.

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Pl. 1: A hidden valley near the Tibetan border



Pl. 2: Eroded ancient chapel



Pl. 3: Master of the Kadampa school & Bodhisattvas
Avalokiteśvara, Amitāyus, Vajrapāṇi



Pl. 4: Entrance of main temple



Pl. 5: Caturbhuja Mahākāla and his retinue



Pl. 6: Karma-Mahākāla Kākamukha



Pl. 7: Tsen demon of the retinue



Pl. 8: Buddhakapāla



Pl. 9: Vajrasattva Yogāmvata



Pl. 10: Cakrasamvara



Pl. 11: Hevajra



Pl. 12: Kālacakra



Pl. 13: Vajradhātu



Pl. 14: Guhyasamāja



Pl. 15: Vajrabhairava



Pl. 16: Vajra Yamāntaka,
(Pañcakula-Yamāntakas)



Pl. 17: Padma Yamāntaka
(Pancakula-Yamāntakas)



Pl. 18: Pancakula-Yamāntakas
& Vajrabhairava



Pl. 19: Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158), flanked by Phagpa (1235-1280), Mahāsiddha Virupa, Sakya Pandita (1182-1251), Khön Khönchog Gyalpo (1034-1102)



Pl. 20: Amitābha and his retinue



Pl. 21: Sakyapa master



Pl. 22: Sarvavid Vairocana.



Pl. 23: Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158), flanked most probably by Atisa (982-1054), left, and unknown scholar



Pl. 24: Masters of the Sakya Tradition



Pl. 25: Ādi-Buddha Vajradhara with
Ghanta and Vajra



Pl. 26: Sixteenarmed Hevajra in Yab-Yum