Art and Architecture in Ladakh

Cross-Cultural Transmissions in the Himalayas and Karakoram

Edited by

Erberto Lo Bue and John Bray
Contents

List of Contributors vii
List of Illustrations xii

Introduction 1
Erberto Lo Bue and John Bray

1 Ancient Petroglyphs of Ladakh: New Discoveries and Documentation 15
Tashi Ldawa Thsangspa

2 Embedded in Stone—Early Buddhist Rock Art of Ladakh 35
Phuntsog Dorjay

3 Historic Ruins in the Gya Valley, Eastern Ladakh, and a Consideration of Their Relationship to the History of Ladakh and Maryul
With an Appendix on the War of Tcede (rTse lde) of Guge in 1083 CE by Philip Denwood 68
Neil and Kath Howard

4 An Archaeological Account of Ten Ancient Painted Chortens in Ladakh and Zanskar 100
Quentin Devers, Laurianne Bruneau and Martin Vernier

5 The Chorten (mChod rten) with the Secret Chamber near Nyarma 141
Gerald Kozicz

6 The Dating of the Sumtsek Temple at Alchi 159
Philip Denwood

7 The Iconography and the Historical Context of the Drinking Scene in the Dukhang at Alchi, Ladakh 167
Marjo Alafouzo

8 The Wood Carvings of Lachuse. A Hidden Jewel of Early Mediaeval Ladakhi Art 191
Heinrich Poell

9 The mGon khang of dPe thub (Spituk): A Rare Example of 15th Century Tibetan Painting from Ladakh 226
Chiara Bellini

10 Chigtan Castle and Mosque: A Preliminary Historical and Architectural Analysis 254
Kacho Mumtaz Ali Khan, John Bray, Quentin Devers and Martin Vernier
| 11 Lamayuru (Ladakh)—Chenrezik Lhakang: The *Bar Do Thos Grol* Illustrated as a Mural Painting | 274 |
| Kristin Blancke |
| 12 The Lost Paintings of Kesar | 298 |
| John Bray |
| 13 *Tshogs zhing*: a Wall Painting in the New ’Du khang of Spituk (dPe thub) | 314 |
| Filippo Lunardo |
| 14 From Benaras to Leh—The Trade and Use of Silk-brocade | 329 |
| Monisha Ahmed |
| 15 Conservation of Leh Old Town—Concepts and Challenges | 348 |
| André Alexander and Andreas Catanese |
| 16 Revealing Traditions in Earthen Architecture: Analysis of Earthen Building Material and Traditional Constructions in the Western Himalayas | 364 |
| Hubert Feiglstorfer |
| 17 Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Ladakh | 388 |
| John Harrison |

Bibliography 400
Index 428
An Archaeological Account of Ten Ancient Painted Chortens in Ladakh and Zanskar

By Quentin Devers, Laurianne Bruneau and Martin Vernier¹

In memory of André Alexander, his inspiring work and wonderful achievements.

Introduction

The most comprehensive study of the stupa in Ladakh remains that of Tucci published in Indo-Tibetica I (1932). In this book dealing with Tibet and surrounding Himalayan regions, the famous Italian Tibetologist translates various Tibetan texts dealing with the chorten (mchod rtren), the Tibetan equivalent to the Sanskrit stūpa, and presents the material gathered during his expeditions, mainly consisting of clay tablets (tsha tsha). Since then only three publications dedicated to the stupa architecture of Ladakh have been published. Pieper (1980) makes an inventory of various buildings types of chortens in the Indus valley, between Lamayuru (bLa ma g.yu ru) and Hemis (He mis), and shows that there is a considerable variety in their architecture. Mention is made of the ‘signal value’ of some chortens but there is no comment about their origin or possible dating. In Stupa and its Technology: a Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective Dorjee (1996) describes important chortens between Hemis and Spituk (dPe thub). According to him they fall into two categories: late and early stupas. The architecture of the late stupas corresponds to the eight types of chortens acknowledged by the Tibetan tradition since the first quarter of the 14th century. Finally, the study of Ladakhi chortens by Kath Howard (1995) is devoted to monuments belonging to the 11–15th centuries. The author classifies them into five types: stupas associated with Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzung po), Lotsawa (lo tsa ba), Lhabap (lha bab), Gomang (sgo mang) stupas and a fifth miscellaneous type. The chortens are dated according to their traditional asso-

¹ All sites presented in this paper were documented by Devers in 2009, 2010 and 2011, with the exception of the chortens in Nang which were first documented by Vernier in 2003. This fieldwork was funded by the Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l’Asie Orientale (UMR8155; CNRS / EPHE / Paris Diderot-Paris 7 / Collège de France) in 2009, and by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient in 2010 and 2011. All plans and elevations are by Vernier.
cation with Rinchen Zangpo or their link with other remains such as temples. Since 2005 a ‘Stupa Project’ aiming at documenting and categorizing architectural concepts related to the development of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Ladakh has been undertaken by Kozicz (2010b).

At the present state of research, no absolute dating can be provided for any of the ancient chortens of Ladakh. The task is difficult because the monuments are very often in an advanced state of decay due to the nature of the materials used for their construction and also because they are frequently rebuilt or whitewashed.

The idea for this article originated in the summer of 2010 when one of the present authors witnessed the reconstruction of a painted chorten in Zangla (bZang la) in Zangskar (Zangs dkar), as will be discussed below. In terms of conservation this action is a major source of concern since a similar reshaping is intended for the neighbouring chorten of Malakartse Khar (Ma lag mkhar rts mkhar), whose artistic and important historical value has been acknowledged by experts along with similar monuments in Nyarma (Nynar ma), Basgo (Bab sgo), Alchi (A lci), Sumda Chung (gSum mda’ chung), Mangyu (Mang rgyu), Lamayuru, Karsha (dKar sha) and Ichar (gYi char, I mTsar). If not properly restored, these treasures of Ladakhi religious architecture are threatened, as are other unknown or little-known chortens. The authors wish to draw the attention of locals and scholars to ten unknown or little-known monuments so that they can be appropriately preserved and studied in the future. In their capacity as archaeologists, the authors choose to stay out of art-historical debates, including questions about dating, and present the chortens according to their architecture.

As duly noted by Tucci (1988a:15), Tibetan architects divide “[. . .] the building into two different parts: the basis or throne and the stupa as such, in the same way that is usually done for a statue [. . ].” Accordingly, the chortens presented below are classified under three types differentiated by the nature of the

---

throne, hereafter referred to as ‘plinth’ in order to follow a neutral architectural terminology. Type A chortens are characterized by a solid plinth, that of Type B is enterable, and that of Type C is opened on both sides forming a passage through which one can walk (Figure 4.1). The presentation of each type is followed by an individual description of the chortens concerned.

**Type A**

As stated above, this type of chorten is characterized by a solid plinth. However, the lower part of the chorten erected on this plinth presents a small opening revealing an inner painted space. Such monuments are known at Nyarma (see footnote 2 for bibliographical references) and two new specimens of this kind were documented at Ubshi (Ub shi) and Nang (Nang).

**Ubshi**

Francke (1914:66) mentioned several ancient chortens in the village of Ubshi, one of which bears paintings.3 It consists of a tall rectangular plinth on top of which rests a square-based chorten with two receding steps, equal in height, supporting a small hemispherical dome. Each element is separated from the other by a row of projecting horizontal slates (Figure 4.2). There is no upper structure but a thin wooden pole sticks out of the dome. The plinth is built of stones whereas the chorten is a mix of stones and mud bricks. The interior of the chorten is fully stone-roofed (Figure 4.3). The whole monument is plastered and white-washed.

---

3 Francke writes that there are several ancient chorten in the village of Ubshi, and that he examined the interior of one of them. His description of the paintings (colours, figures) matches the one documented by the present authors.
Figure 4.2  Ubshi, plan and elevation. Drawings: Vernier, 2011.
A low square opening (0.7m × 0.7m) at the base of the chorten on the southeastern wall conceals a small rectangular inner space (1.2m × 1.3m and 0.9m high) painted with a limited palette: red and white on a blue background. Although the murals are in a bad state of preservation, their original composition is visible. The back and sidewalls are centred on a damaged haloed deity painted within a square frame and surrounded by rows of miniature seated Buddhas (46 on the left and back walls, 52 on the right one). Two columns of five such Buddhas frame the opening on the fourth wall. The miniatures are outlined in black, thus clearly delineating the figures from the plain blue background (Figure 4.5). Friezes of curtains and geese (ḥamsa) are painted on top of the murals, extending in some places to the stone lintels of the ceiling.
There are traces of colouring on the latter but it is difficult to know whether it was originally fully painted or not. The chorten is still an object of devotion as shown by the fact that clay tablets (Figure 4.4) and used or incomplete sacred texts and threadbare prayer flags have been deposited within the chamber, while stones carved with sacred syllables (ma ni) rest on the outer walls.

**Nang**

In the village of Nang a row of decayed chortens, two of which were painted, mark the approach of a ruined castle locally known as Kenpa (Khen pa). Both chortens are entirely built of stone and exhibit a unique roofing technique.

One is made of a squarish plinth on which rests a platform of similar shape, although slightly smaller in width and height. The two elements are separated by a row of horizontal stones (Figure 4.6). A heap of stones, dressed with mortar, covers the upper platform, recalling the hemispherical shape of a dome. Two openings in this platform (in the north-western and south-eastern walls, both 0.6m × 0.8m) reveal a painted space (1.7m × 1.9m and 1.1m high) arranged around a stone pillar supporting radiant stone lintels (Figure 4.7). The walls, the ceiling and the central pillar were once painted, as evidenced by remains of coating with orange-ochre lines as well as blue, green, red and white colouring.

---

4 These painted chortens were first documented by Vernier in 2003 thanks to information provided by Tsering Tundup, a Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) lama from Zangskar trained at Karsha monastery.
Although one can still distinguish halo lines and the faded remains of small seated figures, the paintings are too decayed to propose any identification.

In the same row of chortens, a second monument provides a link between type A and type B chortens. It uses the same original roofing technique and conceals a similar small inner space. However, the opening is located in the plinth and is accessible at ground level.

**Type B**

Type B buildings are characterized by an enterable plinth supporting one or several chortens. In some cases this plinth, very long and large, is the most
Figure 4.6 Nang, first chorten: plan and elevation. Photo: Vernier, 2011.
prominent element of the monument.\footnote{Such chortens from Nyarma and Stok are described by K. Howard (1995:62). According to her, monuments with a large plinth on which is set one or several disproportionately small chorten(s) are known as ‘Lotsawa’ by Ladakhi scholars. She forwards a piece of information provided by Gelong Thupstan Paldan (Jammu & Kashmir Academy). This is confirmed by the recent publication of the gateway chortens of Basgo, Stok (NIRLAC 2008b: 18, 468) and Lamayuru (NIRLAC 2008: 219) locally known as Lotsawa.} Famous examples of such chortens are known in Nyarma and Mangyu (see footnote 2 for bibliographical references).
Four monuments of this type were documented at Nang, Stongde (sTong sde), Thikse (Khrig se / Khri rtse) and Stok (sTog).

**Nang, Second Chorten**
The other monument in Nang, also entirely built of stone, consists of a rectangular plinth on which rests the crumbling structure of a chorten, made of one or two platforms supporting a circular dome. An opening (0.4m × 0.8m) into the plinth in the south-eastern side leads to a small inner painted chamber (1.3m × 1.5m and 1.4m high). There is a smaller opening in the back wall meant for light only. The inner space and stone roof are identical to that of the chorten already described (Figure 4.9). The only difference is that the central pillar is square and composed of two cut stones on top of each other whereas that of the other chorten is made of one large, untouched, rounded stone. The inner walls of this second chorten retain more plaster, and therefore more traces of their former murals. The range of colours is similar with the addition of black lines. One can still distinguish parts of miniature chortens and a frieze on the top backside of the central pillar with red, blue and black lines, and a stripe of lotus petals.

In this second chorten, and in a third unpainted one built close by with the same stone roofing technique, there are numerous clay tablets, some impressed with inscriptions in Nāgarī script. Their presence is noticeable since such tsha tshas are not frequent in Ladakh.6

**Stongde Marpa Ling Gompa Gandal Chorten**
Located among other chortens in the vicinity of the monastery of Stongde, this painted chorten is locally known as ‘Gandal’.7 The monument is built of stones and composed of a square-ish plinth on which only remains the square base of a chorten. There are no remains of the upper structure which, according to

---

6 Francke and Tucci collected tsha tsha with ‘Indian characters’, either termed ‘late Gupta’, ‘ancient Nagari’ or ‘śāradā’ from various places in Ladakh. For a list of these clay tablets, see Francke (1914:111–117) and Tucci (1988:73–109). One of the models of tsha tsha found in Nang representing a sgo mang chorten closely resembles one found in Thikse by Tucci bearing the ye dharma formula and “[…] a very corroded inscription in an Indian script of the X–XI century.” See: Tucci (1998:76, No.16).

7 This name might be a derivation of gSal ldan, the location where Indravami built the Descent from Heaven chorten, according to Jamyang (Jamyang Zhyap Na-gawang Dorje, mChod rten gyi thig rtsa mdo rdu, Collected works of Jamyang Zhyapa, Vol. I, New Delhi 1974) as quoted in Dorjee (1996:19). The name of the builders, localities and even of the eight types of stupa of the Tathāgata acknowledged by the Tibetan tradition varies in the sources: Dorjee (1996:11–21); Tucci (1988: 21–24).
one of the senior monks of Stongde, collapsed about 40–50 years ago. Since then, a roundish undressed low wall has been built to replace the collapsed northern corner probably in order to keep local herds out of the chorten. The opening leading to the small inner painted chamber (1.5m × 1.8m) was in the now crumbled north-eastern wall.
The inner paintings are slowly getting covered by mortar melting from the upper level of the walls and are, as a result, in a bad state of conservation. The wall facing the entrance bore clay sculptures as indicated by plastered aureoles and banners as well as holes left by the struts used to attach them. The two sidewalls display a mandala, of which only the outer circle is still visible on the partly collapsed right wall. The mandala on the left wall is surrounded by seated Buddhas in various mūdram (Figures 4.11, 4.12 & 4.12). Some have their complexion rendered by means of colour gradient. The collapsed entrance wall retains traces of a protective deity in pratyāliḍha. This posture and jewellery details suggest the representation of Māhākāla (Tib. mGon po). The small
Figure 4.10  Stonde Gandal chorten: plan and elevation. Photo: Vernier, 2011.
figure of Śrīdevī (Tib. dPal ldan lha mo) above it, in the upper right corner, corroborates this identification, as does another female protector, seated on a peacock right behind her. The red fish she holds in her right hand and her pointed ears correspond to a form of Vārāhī (Tib. Phag mo). A series of bands (curtains, crossed flowers, oval motifs) runs around the chamber on top of all four walls. The faded murals show a limited palette of red, blue and white. Some areas were repainted, as can be seen at several spots on the upper part of the murals where the friezes were patched with rougher mortar painted in brighter colours, thus pointing to an ancient repair of the chorten. It should be noted that most characters depicted in the murals had their faces deliberately scratched out.

**Thikse Double Chamber Chorten**

This chorten is located in the vicinity of a ruined temple at Thikse locally known as Kiki Lhakhang. The wider environment includes three other ruins of temples, two rows of 108 chortens and another set of three painted chortens

---

8 This chorten was first reported by Kozicz during the 13th conference of the IALS in 2007 (see Kozicz in this volume). It is referenced in Kozicz (2010) as 'Nyarma Northern Section. Stupa with the Hidden Chamber'.

---

**Figure 4.11** Stongde Gandal chorten: left wall. Photo: Devers, 2010.
The monument is composed of a high plinth built of stones, on which lies a crumbled brick chorten. It seems to have been composed of a rectangular base supporting two rectangular steps in turn supporting a large circular flatten dome. There is no upper element.

The inner space of the monument, damaged by successive whitewashing, is painted at two levels accessible by two openings: one in the plinth and one at the bottom of the chorten, respectively on the south-eastern and north-eastern sides. In the ground floor chamber, at least two brick walls were built in addition to the outside stone walls, creating a double wall structure. The wall facing the entrance is damaged, and a hole in it reveals a small space between the brick and the stone wall (Figure 4.14). The murals of the ground floor are painted using variations of green, blue, red and white, while black is used for outlining. The walls are covered with miniature seated Buddhas, the number of which cannot be asserted as only some parts of the paintings have survived.
Figure 4.13  Thikse: plan and elevation. Photo: Vernier, 2011.
the process of decay (Figure 4.15 & 4.15) These small figures once framed central ones of bigger size that appear to have been enclosed within an elaborate architectural frame. Symmetrically disposed between the rows of miniature Buddhas are lotus buds motifs and white rectangles. A closer look reveals that the latter were once filled with Tibetan U-chen (dbu can) inscriptions. Most rectangles and Buddhas’ faces were cautiously abraded. While there are bands of painted curtains and geometric designs running on the upper part of the ground floor murals there is a frieze of geese on the second level. There the northern wall, seemingly displaying a Buddha flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas, is best preserved. The space between the two levels is open, although stone lintels coming out of the lower walls, at the level of the painted curtains, may indicate an original intermediary ceiling. Between the two floors there is a painted row of chortens of various types resting on a frieze of lotus with down-turned petals. There is no painted or wooden ceiling and the inner dome reveals the mud brick structure of the chorten.
Mentioned to us by André Alexander, the late co-director of the Tibet Heritage Fund, in the spring of 2011, the Stok Kadam (sTog bka’ gdam) chorten is located in the vicinity of a ruined temple locally known as Lotsawa Lhakhang and other groups of chortens. The whole structure is white-washed and built with bricks except for the lower part of the walls, which is made of stones. The high square plinth is entered through a low door (about 0.8m wide and 1.1m high) on the northern side. A row of horizontal stones marks the top of the plinth which supports a crumbled chorten. There might have been a base or steps but only the tall, slightly conic, dome with an opening, located above the door of the plinth, is preserved. A row of stones crowns the top of the dome. The inner space of the plinth is unique: a small corridor leads to a central space under the dome and in the back wall, opposite the corridor, there is a niche. The chamber opens on two parallel side corridors, which, altogether,

9 A presentation of this chorten was made by Kozciz under the form of a poster at the 21st conference of the European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art held in Paris in July 2012. A short description and a photograph of this chorten under the name 'Lotsava' can be found in NIRLAC (2008b:468).
delineate an area of about 4.3m × 4.3m. All three corridors are covered by a ceiling (2.5m high) entirely made of stone lintels (Figure 4.17). This technique is remarkably well suited to the ground plan, reminding that of a temple. Whether the roofing technique was chosen because it fits well the plan or the
other way around remains an open question. Above the chamber two stone lintels indicate the existence of an intermediary ceiling, most likely opened so that the light passing through the opening of the dome reached the core of the building.

All 17 walls were once painted but unfortunately only the upper half of the murals is preserved. The colouring includes yellow ochre, deep red, greenish

**Figure 4.17** Stok Kadam chorten: plan of stone-roof. Corbels and lintels are viewed from underneath, looking up. Stones with a darker colour rest on stones with a lighter colour. Photo: Devers, 2012.
earth, black and white. The walls display three rows of mutilated seated Buddhas in various mūdras (western, eastern and southern walls), numbering 108—if the murals were symmetrical—and representations of varied chortens (northern walls) (Figures 4.18, 4.19 & 4.19). The top of the walls retains a frieze of curtains under a band of geese. Two different styles of curtain friezes suggest two stages of painting. A third, more recent, stage corresponds to the repainting of the miniature chortens on the walls of the entrance corridor and that of a small portion of the frieze of curtains on a wall of the southern section. The side corridors and the back niche were used over the centuries to deposit tsha tsha, the layer of which reached half a metre in height in some places. In 2012, restoration work was carried out by the villagers in the chorten. It included the putting up of a wooden doorframe, wooden columns to support the roof and wooden shelves to sort the tsha tsha.

**Figure 4.18**  Stok Kadam chorten: western-most wall. Photo: Devers, 2011.
Type C

Like the previously described types, Type C is composed of a high rectangular plinth on which is erected the chorten proper. Its particularity is that it has an opening into the plinth through which one may pass and raise one’s head to look at the hollow, sometimes painted, inner core of the chorten. In Ladakh, this type of chorten is locally known as Kagan, Kakani or Kankani. The conventional English expression for this kind of building is ‘gateway chorten’. Such monuments are known all over the Tibetan cultural area. In Ladakh early examples are located in Karsha, Lamayuru, Basgo, Alchi and Mangyu (see footnote 2 for bibliographical references). The authors have

10 On the etymology of the term, see Francke (1914:87, 98); Goepper (1993:140); Linrothe (2006:171–74).
Figure 4.20  Nyoma Khawaling chorten: plan and elevation. Photo: Vernier, 2011.
documented four: two at Nyoma (Nyo ma), one at Shera (Wylie unknown) and one at Zangla.

*Nyoma Khawaling Main Gateway Chorten*\(^{11}\)

This large gateway chorten belongs to a group of chortens erected below the monastery, ancient fortification and settlement of Nyoma. A *mani* wall and two small three-tiered square-ish chortens were built right up against the plinth of the gateway chorten, respectively on the eastern and western walls. The tall square-ish plinth and the chorten resting on top of it are built of stones that were formerly plastered. The remains of red paint and plastered motifs are still visible on the plinth and the square-ish base of the chorten. The upper part of both elements is enhanced by cornices. The base of the chorten supports a flight of four receding steps, equal in height. A circular dome, now partly sinking into the upper step, is crowned by a rectangular *harmikā* surmounted by a central pole.

Two very low and narrow doors on the northern and southern sides of the plinth enable one to pass underneath the chorten and discover a surprisingly rich inner iconographic programme. Francke (1914:57) reports the discovery of this chorten by Dr F.E. Shawe who wrote that it was “...by far the finest piece of mchod-rten decoration” he had seen.\(^{12}\)

The inner space of the chorten is cubic (2.2m × 2.2m and 2m high) with four painted sidewalls and a decorated wooden ceiling. Photographs of the ceiling and two details of the walls were recently published by Ham (2010:27–29) and NIRLAC (2008c:362).\(^{13}\) Below the murals, at the base of the walls, stone consoles may indicate an original lower ceiling, underneath the paintings. The collapsed dome is likely at the origin of the cracks observed on the walls, but luckily reinforcement by wooden pillars ensured a fair state of preservation of the murals.

The painted walls and ceiling are predominantly dark blue and red, with the additional use of pink, green, white and very thin black lines. The composition of the four sidewalls is identical: there is a main deity surrounded by six secondary ones horizontally framed by two rows of minor divinities (Figures 4.21, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23 & 4.24). The complexion of the figures is rendered by means of colour gradient. The murals are arranged around four central enthroned

---

\(^{11}\) This chorten is referenced as ‘Nyoma Stupa 1’ in Kozicz (2010). In NIRLAC (2008c:362) it is referred to as ‘Kaling’.

\(^{12}\) Francke reproduces a letter of Dr. Shawe dated 19th July 1906.

\(^{13}\) A paper entitled *The Painted Stupa at Nyoma / Ladakh* is under preparation by Ham (2010:173).
Figure 4.21  Nyoma Khawaling chorten: east wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures and there may therefore be some geometrical distortion. Photo: Devers, 2011.

Figure 4.22  Nyoma Khawaling chorten: south wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures and there may be some geometrical distortion. Photo: Devers, 2011.
Figure 4.23  Nyoma Khawaling chorten: west wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures and there may be some geometrical distortion. Photo: Devers, 2011.

Figure 4.24  Nyoma Khawaling chorten: north wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures and there may be some geometrical distortion. Photo: Devers, 2011.
cosmic Buddhas (Skr. Jina, Tib. rGyāl ba), as indicated by their individual colours, mudrās and vehicles (Skr. vāhana), flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas. This central group is surrounded by two seated divinities at the shoulder level and four, also seated, painted below. This group of seven deities is framed by an upper and lower row of varied standing and seated figures numbering eleven for the former and nine to eleven for the latter. The lower band depicts invariably one of the lokapālas in the middle surrounded by siddhas (Tib. grub thob) as well as wrathful and protective deities (Figure 4.25).14 Below are narrative scenes of the Buddha’s life (Figure 4.25). They begin on the eastern wall with a first set of eight scenes in a chronological sequence, but they are then in a mixed order and unequally distributed on the three remaining walls (seven scenes on the southern wall, nine on the western and northern ones). The bottom of the painted area is dotted at some places with Tibetan U-med (dbu med) lettering partly erased. The depiction of scenes of the Buddha’s life in the lower register of paintings is typical of Drigung (‘Bri gung) shrines as evidenced for example in the Lakhang Soma (lha khang so ma) at Alchi, Wanla Sumtsek (Wam le gSum brtsegs), the Guru Lhakhang (Gu ru lha khang) near Phyang (Phyi dbang) or the Secret Room of Lingshed (Ling shed) monastery (Linrothe 2007a:51). The association of Nyoma Khawaling gateway chorten with the so-called Central Tibet-derived style of painting is confirmed by the colour palette and stylistic details such as the Buddhas’ thrones (for example the scrollwork emerging from the makaras (Tib. chu srin) beside the head nimbus and Garuda at the top of the latter), their stripped dhotis and peculiar crowns (triangular crests set into three tiers “[. . .] surmounted by a broad chignon with a fan-shaped play of ribbon at each side of the crown and a round flower above each ear” (Linrothe and Kerin 2001:59). Another stylistic marker is the triangular plaque above the shoulders, at the intersection of the head and body nimbus, of some figures.

The ceiling, conceived as a mandala, is made of wooden planks forming five concentric squares which diminish in size as they rise in height (Figure 4.26). Both vertical and horizontal surfaces are painted. The four outer corners of

---

14 Noticeable is the representation of a dark-skinned Indian siddha naked with a yoga-pata band around his knees. Similar images are known at Alchi, in the Sumtsek and the Great Stupa, as well as in the Sumtsek of Wanla. This siddha is either identified as Nāropa (Goepper 1996a:102, 109; Tsering 2009:49) or Padampa Sangye (Linrothe 2007b:65). The representation, one beside the other, of the goddesses Śrīdevī (Tib. dPal ldan lhamo) and Remati (Re mati) is another highlight of the murals. Similar representations of Remati are known in Alchi (one in the Sumtsek, one in the Dukhang, one in the Manjushri Lhakhang and one in the Lakhang Soma) and Thikse.
the ceiling are each marked by a painted vase of plenty (Skr. pūrṇaghaṭa). The two outermost squares, supported by wooden consoles, are painted with scrollwork on their horizontal surfaces and geese on the vertical ones. The next two squares exhibit horizontally golden mantras in Tibetan U-chen script in relief and miniature seated Buddhas and deities vertically. The topmost, inner square bears the four gates of the mandala on its horizontal surface and miniature deities on the vertical one. The centre of the mandala is occupied by a representation of Akṣhobya in typical bhūmiśparsa mudrā and seated upon his emblem, the vajra. He is surrounded by eight secondary deities placed in lotus petals. All nine central figures are in clay and gilded. Among the inscriptions on the outer squares of the ceiling one can read the mantra of Akṣhobya Om kankani kankani. This tends to confirm the hypothesis that Kankani chortens are so-called in reference to this particular dhāraṇī written on their inner walls (Linrothe 2006:172–73).
Beyond doubt, a detailed study of the iconographic programme of Nyoma Khawaling chorten will prove to be very valuable for the history of early Buddhist painting not only in Ladakh but also in the whole of the Western Himalayas.

**Nyoma Smaller Gateway Chorten**

In the vicinity of the Nyoma Khawaling Chorten is another, smaller, painted gateway chorten. This is not reported by Shawe or Francke although it stands right next to the one already described, the passage of the former being in the axis of the door of the latter. Smaller in size, it is also entirely built of stone, once plastered. The squarish base of the chorten supports two receding steps, apparently equal in height. The upper part of the monument is a mix of melted

---

15 This chorten is referenced as ‘Nyoma stupa 2’ in Kozicz (2010b).

**Figure 4.26** *Nyoma Khawaling chorten: ceiling. Photo: Devers, 2011.*
earth and stones. The inner space is cubic (1.4m × 1.5m and 1.1m high) and topped by a lantern ceiling. As in the chorten of Thikse previously mentioned, there are inner mud bricks walls. Those are supported by wooden beams resting on a layer of stones.

Although two of the four walls are not well preserved, the inner composition of the murals is clearly visible. The colour range is limited to shades of red and black on a white background thus creating a high contrast effect. Some figures are unfinished: one can clearly see ochre preliminary drawings, while the finished figures are drawn with black lines. The northern wall shows a central seated and enthroned cosmic Buddha flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas.
and surrounded by four secondary seated deities. (Figure 4.28) They face a mandala on the southern wall framed by two vertical rows of miniature deities. (Figure 4.29) The opposite eastern and western walls are covered with five horizontal rows of six seated Buddhas. A band of geese runs on top of the murals. The lantern ceiling is built of stone lintels coated and painted, although partly unfinished. There are beautiful geometric motifs and scrollwork and one can faintly distinguish depictions of deities.

**Shera Gomang Gateway Chorten**
The gateway chorten at Shera (She ra) marks the approach of a beautifully preserved ancient fortified settlement, locally said to have been besieged by the armies of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The plinth, built of stones, has its upper part decorated by a row of plastered downward pointed lotus petals, an outer
decoration rarely preserved on Ladakhi chortens. The brick-built chorten is composed of a square base on which lie three receding cross-shaped steps decreasing in height. There are three openings in each step; accordingly the model of chorten is that known as “Many Doors” Stupa (sgo mang mchod rten). A high circular dome tops the structure. Each element of the chorten is separated from the other by projecting slates (Figure 4.30). The passage in the plinth is roofed with wooden beams. Below the chorten, within each wall of the passage there is a niche marking the location of a now gone statue.

16 On lotus decoration see: K.Howard (1995:69). Other examples of chortens with downward-pointing petals plastered on their plinths are known at Tragkhung Kowache (Ham 2010—the righthand image on page 25 is identical to the one shown in Kozicz (2010b) as ‘Tragkhung Kowache Stupa with Niches’); and Nyarma (Kozicz 2010b: Nyarma Southern Section. Stupa 7). Other specimens were documented by the present authors at Shera, Shernos and Ensa (‘En sa, dBen sa). For the chortens of Ensa see also Kozicz (2010b). Chortens with upward-pointing plastered petals are found at Sabu (K. Howard 1995:Pl.11), Rumtse (Rum rtse) and Trakhung Kowache (Francke 1914:plate XXXI, which is erroneously labelled as being in Gya (rGya); Kozicz (2010b – ‘Rumtse Stupa with Niches, Trakhung Kowache Stupa with Lotus Plinth). A crumbled chorten with plastered trifoliate leaves and upward-pointing lotus petals was documented by Devers at Staglung (Stag lung) near Nyoma.
Figure 4.30  Shera: plan and elevation. Drawing: Vernier, 2011.
The walls of these niches were also once ornamented by two painted standing figures of which contour lines only remain.

The inner space of the chorten (1.8m × 2m) is composed of four painted sidewalls covered by a painted wooden lantern ceiling. Unfortunately, successive whitewashing over the years has damaged the paintings, and the plaster is coming off. A simple range of colours is used: brown, blue, orange ochre and red, all applied on a white background. The murals give the impression of an unfinished work. Various stages of drawing completion are obvious, some figures being left as preliminary sketches while others are more finished. Colour gradient is used to render the complexion of some characters. The four walls are composed in the same manner: in the middle is a rectangular frame containing a large seated enthroned deity flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas and two seated monastic figures (Figure 4.31). The four central deities and accompanying attendants have their crowns and jewels in gold paint (Figure 4.32). Around the rectangular frames are rows of seated Buddhas (68 on the north western wall, 61 on the north-eastern and south-eastern walls, 55 on the south-western wall). There are fewer seated Buddhas on the latter because below the main figure is the depiction of a drinking scene. There are monastic and lay figures seated in two rows. The upper row is composed of three monks facing a couple of lay (?) persons holding a cup. The lower row shows three lay persons, a man with arms surrounded by two ladies: all are holding a cup offered by two attendants. One of them is represented kneeling while the other is standing and carrying one of the six jars represented. The lantern ceiling retains painted geometrical motifs in the corners and its structure, made of wooden boards, is perfectly visible.

**Zangla mkhar Gateway Chorten, a Preoccupying Case**

The gateway chorten of the ancient palace of Zangla, the ancient capital of lower Zanskar, is located among other chortens and mani walls marking the approach of the ruined site. This particular chorten is a concerning case for the conservation of Ladakhi heritage. In 2009 it was restored by means of cement, not only destroying its original shape forever—and consequently any archaeological information—but also endangering the inner murals by sealing with concrete what was once a breathing earthen structure (Figure 4.34).17

---

17 The ‘restoration’ was carried out by the Italian association Stupa Onlus. For the period 2011–2013 this association planned similar work for the painted chortens of Malakartse Khar in Zangla and the Kadampa (bka’ gdam pa) chorten in Karsha as well as Shey’s (Shel) Gomang chorten (locally known as ‘Nepali’ chorten) and other chortens in Tingmosgang (sTing mo sgang), Lamayuru, Mulbekh (Mul bhe), Rangdum (Rang ’dum) and Phey (Phye).
Figure 4.31  *Shera: north-western wall. This image is the result of the merging of several pictures and there may be some geometrical distortion. Photo: Devers, 2010.*

Figure 4.32  *Shera: detail. Photo: Devers, 2010.*
The original rectangular plinth was built of stones. Round wooden beams lay on top to support the earthen structure of the chorten, which was composed of a squarish base topped by three seemingly circular sections increasing in height. The intermediary section retained projecting elements on one side, probably symbolising steps (Figure 4.33). The type of chorten that served as model thus might have been ‘the Descent from Heaven’ (*lha bab*). A decayed small hemispherical dome from which a pole came out crowned the chorten. No upper elements (*harmikā*, umbrellas or finial) were to be seen before the restoration of the chorten. The section under the steps, the steps and the dome were separated from one another by protruding slates resting on rounded sticks. The whole structure was originally plastered.

Over the passage, the inner base of the chorten is partially closed by a frame made of wooden boards. The four corners are dotted with round flower designs. The boards on either side of the opening repeat the same designs: the traditional endless knot pattern (*dpal be’u*) and a design composed of alternative spirals framed by bands of pearls. The inner space of the chorten is cubic. The four painted sidewalls and the lantern wooden ceiling are painted using predominantly orange, red, green, black and white. Although the murals are
not well preserved, their composition, identical on the four sidewalls, is still identifiable (Figure 4.35). In the middle, there is a large enthroned seated deity painted within a square frame. The figure is seated on a lotus throne supported by pillars and alternate facing elephants and lions. The main deity is surrounded by rows of seated miniature Buddhas. The composition of one of the walls is distinguished from the others by the representation of both male and female laymen immediately below the throne of the central figure, a common way to include sponsors and donors. The boards of the ceiling are painted with alternate flower, geometric and check board patterns, the central top space being occupied by a representation of a multi-headed Vairocana, as confirmed by the presence of lions on either side (Figure 4.36). The two well-preserved central figures of the sidewalls are also accompanied by their vehicles (a Garuḍa and a horse). The complexion, mudrā and orientation confirm that the iconographic programme of the chorten corresponds to that of the five Jinas.

Figure 4.35  Zangla: one of the walls (proportions may be affected due to perspective correction). Photo: Devers, 2010.
Conclusion

About half of the ten painted chortens described in this paper mark the approach of ruined settlements and fortifications (at Nang, Nyoma, Shera and Zangla), while the others are linked to religious sites. All three types described above are hybrid: they have the external appearance of a chorten but their core, sheltering paintings and sometimes sculptures, is similar to that of a shrine. The iconographic programme occupies the inner space either of the plinth or of the chorten, sometimes both, as in the case of Thikse. When occupying the plinth, the main deity is represented on the back wall and the entrance wall bears protective deities, as in Stongde for example. When occupying the chorten, as it is the case for half of them (Ubshi, Nang first chorten, both Nyoma chortens, Shera and Zangla), the ceiling is invariably painted. It is even the focus of composition in gateway (Type C) chortens: it is where the main deity is depicted while four secondary ones are represented at the centre

---

In Ubshi the environment of the chorten has likely changed a lot over the years and the chorten is now standing in the middle of the village. In its present state, it is therefore not possible to define its original archaeological context.
of the walls. When the inner decoration is preserved well enough to enable the identification of the divinities, as in Nyoma Khawaling chorten, Shera Gomang chorten and Zangla, the iconographic programme corresponds to the five Jinas. This organisation is known in other gateway chortens in Karsha, Ichar and Alchi (Linrothe 2002; Linrothe and Kerin 2001:55–57; Luczanits 1998:156). All three types of chortens are characterized by the fact that the paintings are seen with difficulty. In types A and B chortens the narrowness of the openings undoubtably shows that the murals were not meant to be seen, at least not by everyone. In type C chortens the paintings are very high up, beyond the reach of the viewer.19

From a construction point of view all but one of the chortens (Nyoma’s Khawaling chorten) have a lantern ceiling. The ceilings are made of wooden boards, apart from Nyoma’s second chorten in which the lantern is made of stone lintels. In fact, half the chortens described above feature stone roofs: Ubshi, both Nang chortens, Stok and Nyoma’s second chorten. Although usually not noticed, such a roofing technique is used for other well-known painted chortens, as in Malakartse (Linrothe 2007a) and Thikse-Nyarma (Kozicz 2007b), and also unpainted ones, as observed by the authors during fieldwork. In two cases, in Nang, the roofing technique may even have affected the iconographical programme. Indeed, a construction with a central stone pillar might have influenced the conception of the murals, as a central element had to be painted in addition to the four walls of the chamber.20 It would have been interesting to see how the artists had responded and adapted to it, but unfortunately the paintings are too decayed. We propose to link the use of stone roofing in these chortens to a building tradition that shares common roots with the numerous ancient stone-roofed buildings (watchtowers, castles, fortified and unfortified settlements) documented by the present authors throughout Ladakh and in Upper Tibet by Bellezza (2008:32–37, 56–57). In the latter region the use of stone roofs for early, small, Buddhist structures is also documented.21

19 For a possible interpretation of the ‘invisibility’ of the paintings in gateway chortens (type C) see Linrothe (2002:94–95). His hypothesis that “These images are not made for viewing; indeed they are rendered more powerful by being unseen. For the patron, merit accrues from the making and the presence of the external structure in the landscape, but not by subsequent acts of viewing the interior paintings”. This principle could also be applied to Type A and B chortens.

20 This configuration recalls that of a mandala. The construction with a central pillar might have been intentional thus tending to a three-dimensional mandala with murals organized accordingly. One wonders whether the roofing technique was adapted to such a design or the other way round.

21 Private communication with John Vincent Bellezza, June 2011.
All ten painted chortens described above have a stone plinth supporting a brick-built or mixed (stone and bricks) chorten. An interesting feature observed in Thikse and Nyoma is the building of an internal brick wall in addition to the outer stone one. This element could be observed only in two damaged chortens where the internal structure is visible and it is possible that others use such internal brick walls. The reason for this construction feature might that brick walls have a better resistance to water infiltration, due to the inherent absorptive capacity of this material’s homogeneous mass. Indeed, we repeatedly observed that coatings, and consequently paintings, are better preserved when applied on a mud brick support as opposed as one in stone masonry. Turning to the murals, features such as bands of geese running on top of the walls, the rendering of the characters’ complexion by means of colour gradient or else specific topics such as Buddha’s life scenes and drinking scenes are without doubt artistically and historically significant. All deserve a detailed iconographic and stylistic analysis by competent art historians.

The aim of our short description of each of these chortens was to show their richness and great potential for the study of the history of Buddhism in Ladakh and the Western Himalayas. It is of the utmost importance to protect and preserve them. As we have seen in Zangla and can be observed throughout Ladakh, the action undertaken by some NGOs and various other organisations is, in some cases, a threat to Ladakh’s cultural heritage. Addressing this issue in a previous note (Vernier, Bruneau and Devers 2011) and workshop, we reassert here the urgent need for an authority and legislation to protect Ladakhi heritage, which, considering its richness and the destructions that have occurred in the neighbouring regions, is the unique key witness of a history that goes far beyond its frontiers.

22 The plinth of Stok chorten is built of bricks and has foundations in stone.
23 The authors together with André Alexander organised workshops in May and August 2011 at the Central Asian Museum in Leh to bring together the different actors in conservation in Ladakh with the aim to improve cooperation and protection of Ladakhi built heritage. This workshop resulted in the writing of a proposal presented to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council for the creation of a ‘Heritage Authority’ and legislation for ‘Ladakh Protected Monuments’.