

Chörten in Mustang

A preliminary architectural account of chörten (mchod-rten) with special reference to the chörten of the cave at Luri.

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The following account of the *chörten* of Mustang is based on field trips to Kag in October 1991 and to upper Mustang in April 1992. Altogether some 50 villages were visited in order to obtain an overview of the variety of building types and their representation in different parts of the district.

The cave at Luri was surveyed on April 20, the name Kakom for that cave is preliminary and might prove misleading. The survey of chörten - architecture will be extended in June 1993.

Altogether some 300 to 400 *chörten* may be identified in lower and upper Mustang. These can roughly be divided into two main groups. The more general type is square and has two or three storeys, the roofs of which are more or less articulated. They are 150 to 300 cm high, not taking into account the central pillar (*srog-sin*) emerging from the top. Only a few of these (for example at Giling or Lo Mantang) are 400 to 600 or even 800 cm high to exceed the dimensions of

votive offerings, constituting already a building of monumental size. They are found in almost every location: along the road, in continuation of a *maldang* (mani wall), in the centre of villages, on hillocks and along ridges that define an edge or border. Most of these may be classified as votive offerings to protect a territory and as such they are in most cases grouped in rows of three and collectively called *Rigsum Gönpö* (*Rigs-gsum mgon-po*).

Literally, these three *chörten* are the three (*gsum*) protectors (*mgon-po*) of the families (*rigs*) of Bodhisattvas identified as Vajrapāṇi, Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara. On yet another level of interpretation the three *chörten* represent classes of demons and gods: the serpents (*nāga* = *klu*), divinities who dwell in rocks and the air (*btsan*) and finally the gods (*lha*). *Rigsum Gönpö* are placed beyond the field, at topographically prominent points and places, at the eaves of houses and, in tiny representation (20-30 cm high)

above gates and doors. On yet another level, the colours of the three protectors, black, red and white, may be found vertically as stripes on any buildings or walls and even natural rocks, or as horizontal elements, on larger *chörten*. In that cases, the large cubes are always white, the eaves red. The colours change considerably throughout the district, thus reflecting the availability of material. Black changes into blue or even green (in Tangye), while red may be replaced by yellow. The two examples presented here are to a large extent architecturally articulated. They document at the same time possible variation: the *chörten* at Dankgardzong stands in a group of five on the edge of the village along the road leading south. Placed on a rough plinth the two-storeyed building reaches a height of 200 cm, the emerging trunk of pinewood adding another 160 cm. In design the *chörten* does not follow the usual sequence of base, dome, cube and finial, but consists of two storeys of diminishing size. Every storey is topped by a roof with projecting eaves. Above a layer of mud coloured red follows a layer of brushwood that protects the mud against water seepage. On top of brushwood follow wooden planks that are stabilized by rocks and stones with votive inscriptions. The lower storey has stylized lotus leaves on its corners and shallow niches on each side. Leaf patterns frame the niches that do not contain any iconographical figures. The *chörten* at Lubra stands just beside the meditation-cave of Trashi Gyaltsen (*sGom-phug dgon-pa*). It was built only a few years back and introduces some structural innovations. Placed on a three-stepped plinth the lower cube of the two-storeyed building is slightly tapering. The projecting 'roofs' rests on cantilevers that support wooden planks. Slanting stone slabs cover the projecting eaves. The central pillar (*srog-sin*) emerges only slightly. In its design it follows a well known formula, indicating motifs of the jewel and container (*kalāśa*). A rare variation of this

general type of *chörten* is presented by a building in Dankgardzong. Above a low square plinth that for its most part submerged in a slope, rises a towering building of six levels. This circular structure is not orientated towards the directions of the cosmos. Although being stepped it recalls the purpose of the primeval mound, the stabilization of the central pillar, the Tree of Life.

The second type of *chörten* has a bulged dome as the common denominator. This dome is invariably protected by a roof supported by pillars. This protected dome seems to be the peculiar contribution of Nepal's North to the architecture of the *stūpa*. Similar *chortens* are also found in the neighbouring regions of Manang and Dolpo as well as in Mugu and Humla. Some 45 examples have so far been identified in Mustang. About twelve others around Lo Mantang and Yara are in ruins.

Among the domed *chörten* a marked variation occurs. Nine are built as doorway-*chörten*, called *kennen* (in southern Mustang) or simply the '*chörten* with legs'. All of these mark the entrance into the villages, in two cases (Tangye and Tsarang) they mark the entrances along the main route at two sides of the settlement. In all cases the square space above the passage has wall paintings and the panelled ceiling is painted with thirteen *maṇḍalas*. The dome contains a chamber for ritual offerings (*tša-tša*, manuscripts, etc) and bears a square cube (*harmikā = bre*). The spire with thirteen umbrellas or wheels rest on a circular support, in most cases in the shape of a lotus flower. The central pillar (*srog-sin*) rises above the central *maṇḍala*, resting upon a transverse beam. Four steps mediate between the plinth of the *chörten* and the dome that rests on a lotus socle. The square shape of these steps

allows us to identify this type as the mahābodhi stūpa that recalls the event of the enlightenment of the Buddha at Bodhgaya. This *stūpa/caitya* is one of the eight *mahācaitya*, that survived as groups in Mustang at Tangye (two rows of four) and in Lo Mantang (one row of eight small ones and one row of larger ones of which only four remain).

Cave and *chörten* (mchod-rten) at Luri

A *maṇḍala* on the roof of the cave, suggesting a canopy above the focal, may be considered the central demonstration and key to the iconographical program of the cave. In the center, a female Bodhisattva is depicted. She is surrounded by eight other female Bodhisattvas arranged as the petals on a flower. The perimeter of the *maṇḍala* follows a conventional formula, while further down the ceiling of the cave a series of Aṣṭamahāsiddhas provides another horizontal register, united by a continuous foliage pattern like a creeper. Among the Aṣṭamahāsiddha only two have so far been identified: Luhipa, the Siddha who swallows fish intestines and is known as Matsyandranātha in Nepal; another is Dombipa on lion mount.

The umbrella atop the *chörten* is painted on the downturned surfaces showing eight figures on lotus petals, possibly the Tathāgatas. The sixteen leaves which hang from the disk, bear alternating female attendants (*upacārika*) and decorative motifs.

The second level of iconographic representation is found on the cube (*harmikā*) above the main dome of the *chörten*. Tiny Tathāgatas people the diminutive *harmikā*, only 12 centimeters high. In

an unusual arrangement, Vairocana occupies the east side in a gesture of *dharmacakramudrā*, while Amitābha, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi are found on the west, south, and north side, respectively.

The main dome (*bum-pa*) displays two Bodhisattvas, Vajrapāṇi, invariably associated with the Tathāgata of the north, and Padmapāṇi, the Bodhisattva of Amitābha. A female Bodhisattva is painted on the east side of the dome; the damaged painting on the remaining south side makes identification difficult. Uṣṇiṣavijayā to the east embodies the female aspect of compassion and is regarded as the mother of all Buddhas, the queen of enlightenment. The female aspect of the *chörten*'s iconography is thus reiterated on many levels, as first suggested by the ceiling *maṇḍala*.

The plinth (*bong-bo*, but invariably called *bang-rim* in Lo) in *viṃśatikona* shape displays the four Guardians of the world, the Lokapāla on the four central projecting areas. They are flanked by the eight auspicious symbols, the aṣṭamaṅgala. Vaiśravaṇa with his banner turns north; Dhṛtarāṣṭra with musical instrument east; Virūḍhaka with sword south; and Virūpākṣa with a *chörten* in hands west. The eight corners of the plinth display the Guardians of Religion, the Dharmapālas. The goddess on the northwest corner may be preliminarily identified as Śamkhapālī Devī riding a horse on water. The water is easily recognized and confined to the area just beneath the horse. On the eastern side, two Mahākālas are found; on the southeastern corner possibly Raudrāntaka Mahākāla, riding a lion. Since damage from a landslide in 1972, the paintings on the southwest corner have not been renewed.

The wall of the cave remains painted only on the western end, while all other areas are blackened, with no figural representations surviving. On this western wall, five figures enthroned on lotuses are found from left to right: a Lama (?); Buddha Śākyamuni flanked by two disciples; an unidentified Bodhisattva with two vajras; Vajrapāṇi with a vajra, upright in his right hand and bell in his lap; and lastly, Acala with sword and noose in his right and left hands, respectively. These five figures are framed to create the impression of a wall panel 190 centimeters high. This panel follows the surface of the cave forward in space to create an apse-like zone.

These paintings - of extraordinary quality - have been preliminarily dated to the early 14th century by Roberto Vitali. Although his assignment is based only on photographic evidence, his familiarity with comparable Tibetan wall paintings is well established.

The style of the paintings represents a peculiar blend of influences from Nepal to the south and Tibet and China to the north. While the Bodhisattvas of the wall and *chörten* dome suggest Newar influence, the Guardians of the World, found on the plinth in armoured dress and Chinese attire, exemplify an artistic convention which clearly originated in China and eventually even came to the Kathmandu Valley.

Although a detailed stylistic analysis cannot be attempted within the scope of this paper, it should be suggested that this site at Lo may prove an important link to study further the exchange of artistic traditions between Newars in Kathmandu Valley and the painters of China and Tibet.