

THE LHASA VALLEY
November 27-29th, 1997, Meudon.

Conference Report by Heather Stoddard

An interdisciplinary workshop, entitled: "The Lhasa Valley: History, Conservation and Modernisation in Tibetan Architecture", was held on the premises of the UPR 299 (Milieux, sociétés et cultures en Himalaya), CNRS, Meudon. The workshop was funded by the European Science Foundation, Asia Committee, Leiden. Further grants were provided by the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales and the URA 1229 (Langues et Cultures de l'Aire Tibétaine), CNRS, Paris. The workshop was initiated and prepared by Heather Stoddard, with the assistance of Françoise Robin. Participants came from the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, USA, UK, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Norway and France. Other colleagues were invited from China, Nepal and India.

The city of Lhasa is, with Jerusalem, Rome, Benares and Mecca, one of the holy cities of our planet. The name itself, Lha.sa, meaning "Land of the Gods" or "Sacred Place", proclaims its origin in the mid-7th c., however, archaeological finds confirm the presence of human habitation in the valley since Neolithic times, 4500 years ago. For two hundred years capital of the military empire of Great Tibet, the city became simultaneously the "Sacred Place" of Tibetan Buddhism. Lhasa was also important as a Central Asian city, in historical, cultural and economic terms, drawing pilgrims and merchants from many parts of Asia. Unique by its altitude, at 3700 m. above sea level, Lhasa was and still is one of the places on earth that captures the imagination of humankind.

Lhasa is one of fifty protected historic cities of the PRC. However, at present, the whole valley, including the old city, is undergoing rapid transformation. The very fabric of the heart of Lhasa is in danger. When the workshop was proposed two years ago, 270 sites remained out of the 650 recorded on Aufschnaiter's map in 1948. At the end of 1997, only 180 survive. This is why the workshop sought to concentrate attention on city itself, while at the same time reaching out to the broader question of Tibetan architecture on the high plateau, and beyond.

At present, the *Lhasa Historic City Atlas* is under preparation with the participation of a European-T.A.R. team, headed by Knud Larsen of Trondheim University, Norway, and it was this on-the-ground work done by us over the last four year which created the impetus for the present workshop. French tibetology has also produced a rich and interesting new corpus of materials on Lhasa in the 17th c. during the reign of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, in *Lhasa. Lieu du Divin*, Olizane 1997, ed. F. Pommaret.

The workshop is the first to be held specifically dedicated to this subject. Its aim was interdisciplinary, including anthropologists, historians, architects, tibetologists and sinologists. It was also an experiment, venturing into the sensitive area of cultural heritage conservation, restoration and development in Tibet.

Topics for papers and discussion included the following:

- Myth, history and architecture: foundations of the Lhasa valley - Tibetan and Asian history: Lhasa, Holy City in Central Asia - Traditional habitat and religious architecture on the Tibetan plateau. Links and influences beyond - Technical aspects of Tibetan architecture - The future of Tibetan and Himalayan architecture - Traditional architecture: restoration, conservation and development planning - SAVE: Historic Cities of Europe Project: its application in an Asian context - Social studies: the dynamics of living historic cities - Mapping, town planning - Archives, visual documentation and development of CD ROM resources.

The declared scientific objectives of the workshop were as follows:

- Creation of an East-West forum for scientific research and exchange on Tibetan architecture and habitat - Creation of a strategy for the restoration, protection and development of traditional architecture on the Tibetan plateau - - Creation of Archives of Tibetan Architecture.

It remains to be seen to what extent the above-mentioned long-term scientific objectives will develop in the present context of rampant capitalism, construction of concrete jungles, and the modernisation of society in China and Tibet. It is to be hoped, however, that a heightened awareness of the values of traditional architecture, and the possibilities for its development in the future, will contribute to the protection of the historic city. As we heard during discussions, the Phala House was saved this year, following the initiative taken by Lhasa city residents. This is one important aspect of the evolving situation. Most of these topics were covered or touched upon by the speakers or in discussion, with the exception of the development of CD ROM resources. Several French colleagues who did not present papers acted as chairpersons for the different sessions, and took an active part in discussions. A round table was held at the end of the workshop, during which suggestions on future strategy were discussed. It was concluded that two complementary approaches should be pursued: 1. Research under present existing agreements should be continued, with small on the ground projects working with local authorities. 2. The possibility of launching a large-scale international project should be explored.

Kegan Paul, London, made an early proposal to publish proceedings of the workshop.