

The Development of the Alchi Temple Complex. An Interdisciplinary Approach

Keywords: monastery, Alchi, interdisciplinary analysis, iconographic program, architecture

Abstract

The monastic complex at Alchi, Ladakh, was most likely established sometime in the third quarter of the twelfth century and underwent rapid development over the next century. Today the complex houses five major temples and a number of historically important painted stūpa (Tib. mchod rten), the majority of which can be assigned to the earliest phase of building in the complex. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the complex, the interrelationship of the different buildings becomes evident. While in some cases an investigation of the architectural development clarifies issues of chronological succession and differences in the iconographic program, in other cases art historical analysis of the painted decoration in terms of style, iconography and composition reveals the connections between the architectural parts. Both approaches contribute to an understanding of how a particular structure was used. Such an analysis is also an indispensable tool for planning conservation measures.

Alchi Chökhör (*chos 'khor*) monastery is one of the most intensely studied and widely published Buddhist monuments in the Western Himalayas. Its two most important structures – the Main Temple (gTsug lag khang) and the three-storied Sumtsek (gSum brtsegs) – have received considerable attention. Roger Goepper and Jaroslav Poncar collaborated on a definitive study of the peculiar structure of the Sumtsek, resulting in a large, beautiful volume (Goepper and Poncar 1996). For this analysis, we follow Goepper in dating the Alchi Sumtsek to the early thirteenth century.

The architecture of the overall complex has also received scholarly attention, beginning with a detailed plan by Romi Khosla (Khosla 1979), which focused on the extant buildings. However, a comparative approach incorporating the different historical stages of the complex in an interdisciplinary manner yields new perspectives in many respects.

The following observations summarise the findings of several research visits to Alchi monastery and comparative sites compiled by a group of architects of the University of Technology in Graz, Austria, lead by Holger Neuwirth, in co-operation with Christian Luczanits. This collaboration began with a joint visit to the region in 1998.

A detailed interdisciplinary survey of the buildings and their artistic decoration makes it possible to isolate the earliest stages of the different buildings within the monastic complex and to reconstruct the sequential development of the complex itself. In this summary, we differentiate twelve main stages of development. For reasons of space, this summary only represents our observations on the architecture (Fig. 9), and only contains passing references to the paintings and other artwork within the complex.

The Main Temple (*gTsug lag khang*), the largest structure, is at the centre of the monastic complex (*chos 'khor*). Although there have been alterations to it, at its core, it is universally recognized as the earliest stage in the development of the complex (Fig. 1, no. 1). Architecturally, this original building is a typical tripartite structure consisting of a niche, a comparatively large assembly hall in front of it and a two-pillar-two-pilaster veranda protecting the entrance. This arrangement has many typological comparisons in the region, found for example in the temples of Tabo and Nyarma, which date to the late tenth century in their earliest parts, and Sumda Chung, which is contemporary with the Alchi temples. In comparison to the main temple in Nyarma, the ruins of a wall behind the Alchi Main Temple can be interpreted as fragments of an original ambulatory.

The veranda of the Main Temple was originally open and belongs to the earliest phase of the monument. The triangular structure in the front of the entrance also belongs to the original conception, obviously excluding the figure of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī that now occupies its centre. This type of veranda construction reappears in the three-storied temple of Wanla, the only monument in which this detail remained unaltered. Another likely original element is the beautifully carved, but coarsely repainted doorframe, which thus provides a sound basis for studying the art of contemporary woodcarving.

A survey of the courtyard in front of the Main Temple and the two flanking towerlike structures reveals that these towers were added in a second phase, although only one of them is of the original size and design (Fig. 1, no. 2). These two taller additions have been built against and atop the extant outer walls of the Main Temple. The ambulatory may have been extended around them.

The paintings in the upper chamber are original. Despite their poor condition, they are fairly close in style to those in the Assembly Hall. They thus fit chronologically between the art in the Main Temple and the early thirteenth-century paintings in the Sumtsek. Originally the upper chamber may have been used to store a proto-Kanjur, an early collection of the words of the Buddha, and there may have been a bookshelf in front of the empty space on the main wall. From an architectural perspective, this would

also explain the peculiarities of the building with its raised floor level, a way to prevent moisture from reaching the manuscripts. Thus, form follows function, and there is a practical explanation for the peculiar shape of the structure.

The towerlike structures certainly preceded the courtyard wall that encloses a wider area in front of the Main Temple, although this wall may well have been built only after the Sumtsek was added on the village side of the Main Temple in the early thirteenth century (Fig. 1, no. 3). The intricate three-storied structure of the Sumtsek consists of a square interior with niches on three sides. Although there have been slight alterations to the architecture on the exterior, the temple is preserved in almost immaculate condition. Each of the niches has gabled roofs extending into the upper floor to accommodate the heads of the large Bodhisattva sculptures they house. In addition, the three floors of the structure actually represent three superimposed temples, each with its own veranda and a consistent iconographic program in the interior (Fig. 2). The uppermost storey is actually a small, lantern-size temple. The veranda of the Sumtsek reflects a shift from the more functional character of the Main Temple veranda to a more ornamental role. The triangular insertions are now purely decorative and are set within triple pillars.

It can be assumed that the area in front of the Main Temple always had a public function, and some kind of open space has been there from the beginning. The new courtyard wall actually reduces this space and was probably built for a functional reason (Fig. 1, no. 4). The distortion in its ground plan on the river side (north) can be explained by the drop in elevation in that area. The original decoration of the courtyard was never of the same quality as the earlier paintings, and only one section remains with the original layer intact. All the other paintings have been retraced recently.

The majority of the courtyard walls are covered with the retracings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the upper section and two rows of hitherto unidentified narratives below, presumably stories of the previous births of Śākyamuni. Central deities divide each wall in half. The raised gilding used for the attributes and the halo of Avalokiteśvara shows that the original main panels were of high quality. The off-centre position of Prajñāpāramitā on the right side wall, along with the covering of paintings in the corner, reveals that the tower on this side of the courtyard was considerably expanded at a later stage (see below).

The next building, the Great Stūpa, was the subject of a detailed study by Roger Goepfer (Goepfer 1993) and was probably added immediately after the Sumtsek, both structures having the same donor (Fig. 1, no. 5). As Goepfer ascertained, the Sumtsek is mentioned in the inscription inside the Great Stūpa. At the southwestern end of the complex, the entrance side from the village, the stūpa may have served as a gateway. Today, this entrance is closed off, and one enters the complex slightly to the side of it.

Closer to the Main Temple and immediately in front of the Sumtsek is the so-called Small Stūpa (Figure 1, no. 6), only parts of which have been studied in detail (Luczanits

2006). It may also once have served as a gateway since today it leads straight into the oldest part of the complex (Fig. 3). However, its smaller size may indicate that it was not meant to be used regularly in this way, but rather was a votive structure, prefiguring several smaller chörten immediately to the side of it and found throughout the monastic enclosure and the village.

At around the same time, still in the early thirteenth century, a unique temple dedicated to Nāmasagīti-Mañjuśrī was added on the river side of the Main Temple in an area of lower elevation, which until then seems not to have been used (Fig. 1, no. 7). The temple is a simple square structure with the typical veranda in front of it, and in the interior a narrow ambulatory surrounds the central sculptural platform. The ceiling of the temple reflects the ambulatory with cross bars directed towards the central column. The present-day open lantern is the result of a later adaptation to the original closed lantern ceiling above the sculptures. Remains of the original lantern have been re-used in the present-day lantern, identified through their painting. Thus the Mañjuśrī Temple must originally have had a conical roof just like the lantern of the Sumtsek.

In the next stage (Fig. 1, no. 8), the Translator's Temple was squeezed between the Main Temple courtyard and the Mañjuśrī Temple, with one wall against the slope and the other wall shared with the Mañjuśrī Temple. The pressure from the sloping ground has severely deformed the wall of the temple. The Translator's Temple follows the Mañjuśrī Temple in its basic structure, but it has an original two-storied lantern. The original window of the Mañjuśrī Temple in the shared wall now looks into the interior of the Translator's Temple.

The final phase of the early thirteenth-century development of the Alchi complex included the addition of the raised chörten in the courtyard of the Main Temple (Fig. 1, no. 9). It is located on the central axis leading from the entrance walls towards the temple and uses the original pillars of the veranda on the temple side. Visitors entering the courtyard pass beneath the chörten, which is two-fold, like other chörten in the complex, one enclosing the other.

The duplication that resulted when the Translator's Temple was added to the side of the Mañjuśrī Temple is replicated with the Small Stūpa, where a second, mirror image stūpa, with a decoration stylistically similar to that of the raised chörten in the Main Temple's courtyard is added to its side (Fig. 1, no. 10).

Several other single or double chörten within and beyond the monastic enclosure, and the Lhakhang Soma (New Temple), were added at a later stage but still in a comparatively early period (Fig. 1, no. 11). With the exception of the Lhakhang Soma, which was built some time in the fourteenth century, these structures cannot be dated with certainty, nor is the building sequence clear.

The last stage, we distinguish here, is the extension of the towerlike structure on the right side of the Main Temple and its courtyard (Fig. 1, no. 12). This extension cannot be precisely dated, but it must be fairly recent judging from its sculpture and painted decoration.

This short survey summarizes the historical relationship of the early structures within the monastic enclosure, including some of the more recent additions, on the basis of the architecture. The actual data used are much more varied and include an in-depth art historical analysis. It seems clear that a full understanding of the development of a single building or an entire complex, including its interior decoration, is indispensable to any planned conservation measures.

In the past two decades, however, the historic structures of the Alchi Chökhör have been altered at a breathtaking pace. In addition, since 2000 the Archaeological Survey of India has increased its work on the Alchi temples considerably. The boundary wall of the complex, for example, has been replaced by a metal fence, and roofing has been added to the courtyard of the Main Temple. This extensive work not only increasingly obscures the legibility of the architectural development of the complex, but also disturbs its aesthetic and technological integrity.

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Dr. Christian Luczanits received his MA (1994) and PhD (1998) at the Institute of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, Austria, the latter degree under the supervision of the late Maurizio Taddei (Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli). His research focuses on Buddhist art of India and Tibet. Earlier work on the Western Himalayas was largely based on the extensive field research and documentation done in situ. Besides numerous articles on the early Buddhist monuments, artifacts and inscriptions found in or related to this region his first book, *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay: Early Western Himalayan Art, late 10th to early 13th centuries*, has come out with Serindia at Chicago in 2004. Recent research concentrated on Buddhist art immediately before and during Kushana rule. In this connection he curated the exhibition “Gandhara – the Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan. Legends, Monasteries and Paradise” at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, Germany, together with Michael Jansen and was responsible for its catalogue.

Prof. Dr. Holger Neuwirth graduated at the Faculty of Architecture, Graz University of Technology, followed by PhD and habilitation. Then joined the Graz University of Technology where he has been a member of academic staff since 1969. He was working as a scientist and a university lecturer and was responsible for the field research, excursions and study trips to various parts of the world. In 1996–2000 he was nominated as a Vice rector for education and study affairs, besides this he worked in different periods also as an Erasmus coordinator, Socrates-Promotor for Austria, Diploma Supplement Promotor for Austria, ECTS-DS Counsellor for Austria and Bologna Promotor for Austria. Prof. Neuwirth has been the director of many national and international research projects.

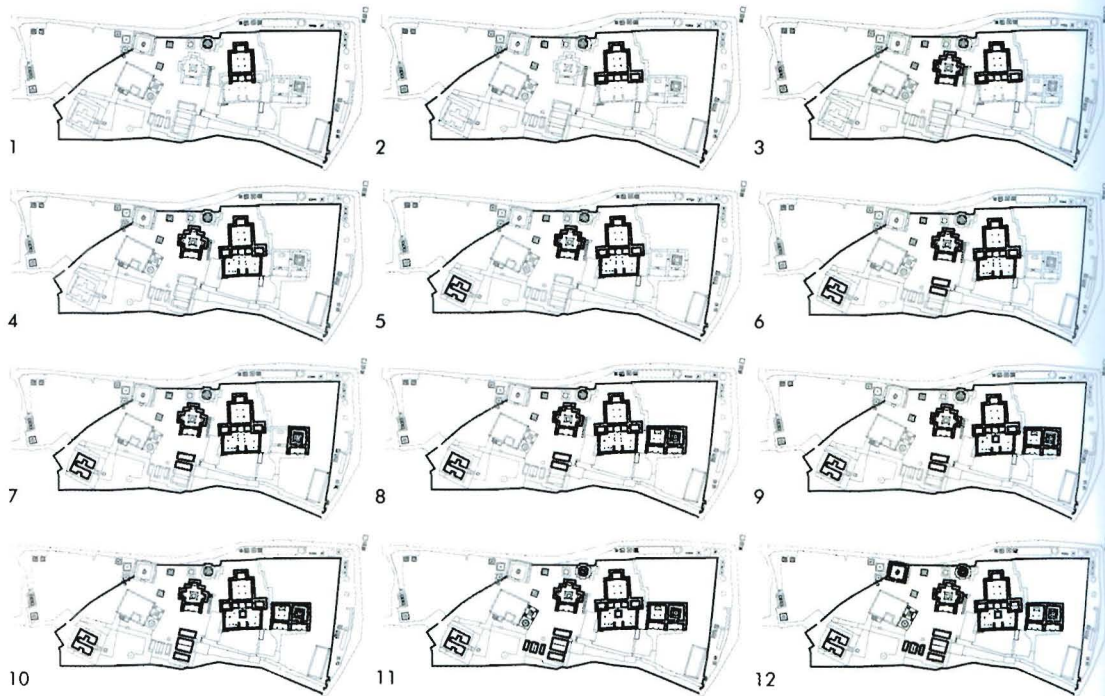


Fig. 1: The historical succession of the earliest temples in the Alchi Chökhör in twelve phases.
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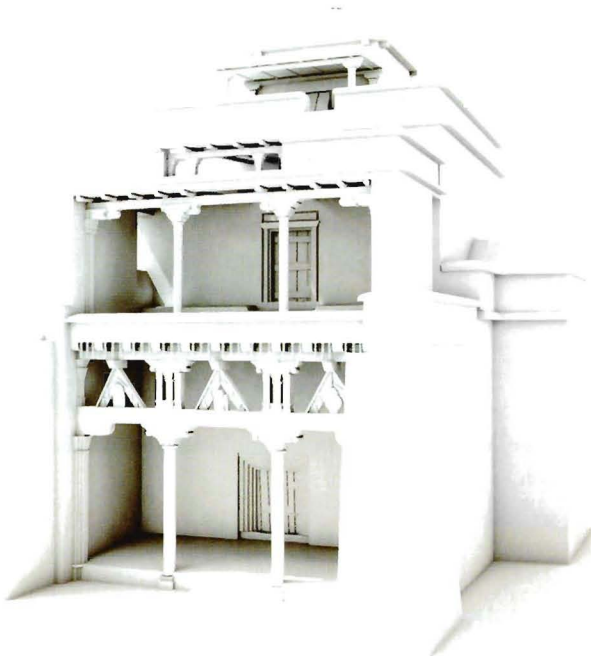


Fig. 2: Reconstruction
of the original condi-
tion of the Sumtsek
with superimposed
verandas.
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Fig. 3: View of the temple complex from the lowest section towards the south. From right, the twin complex of the Mañjuśrī and Translator's Temples, the Main Temple, the roofs of the Sumtsek and the entrance to the Main Temple, with the Small Stūpa and its later twin immediately behind it.

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Gabriela Krist/ Tatjana Bayerová (Hg.)

Heritage Conservation and Research in India

60 Years of Indo-Austrian Collaboration

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