

## TIBET HERITAGE FUND INTERNATIONAL

Project office Ladakh:  
Leh Old Town Initiative LOTI  
Lakruk House, Stalam, Leh, Ladakh  
1941010 J&K India

Project office China:  
China: 4-405  
No. 8 building  
Jiao Dong Xiao Qu  
100007 Beijing

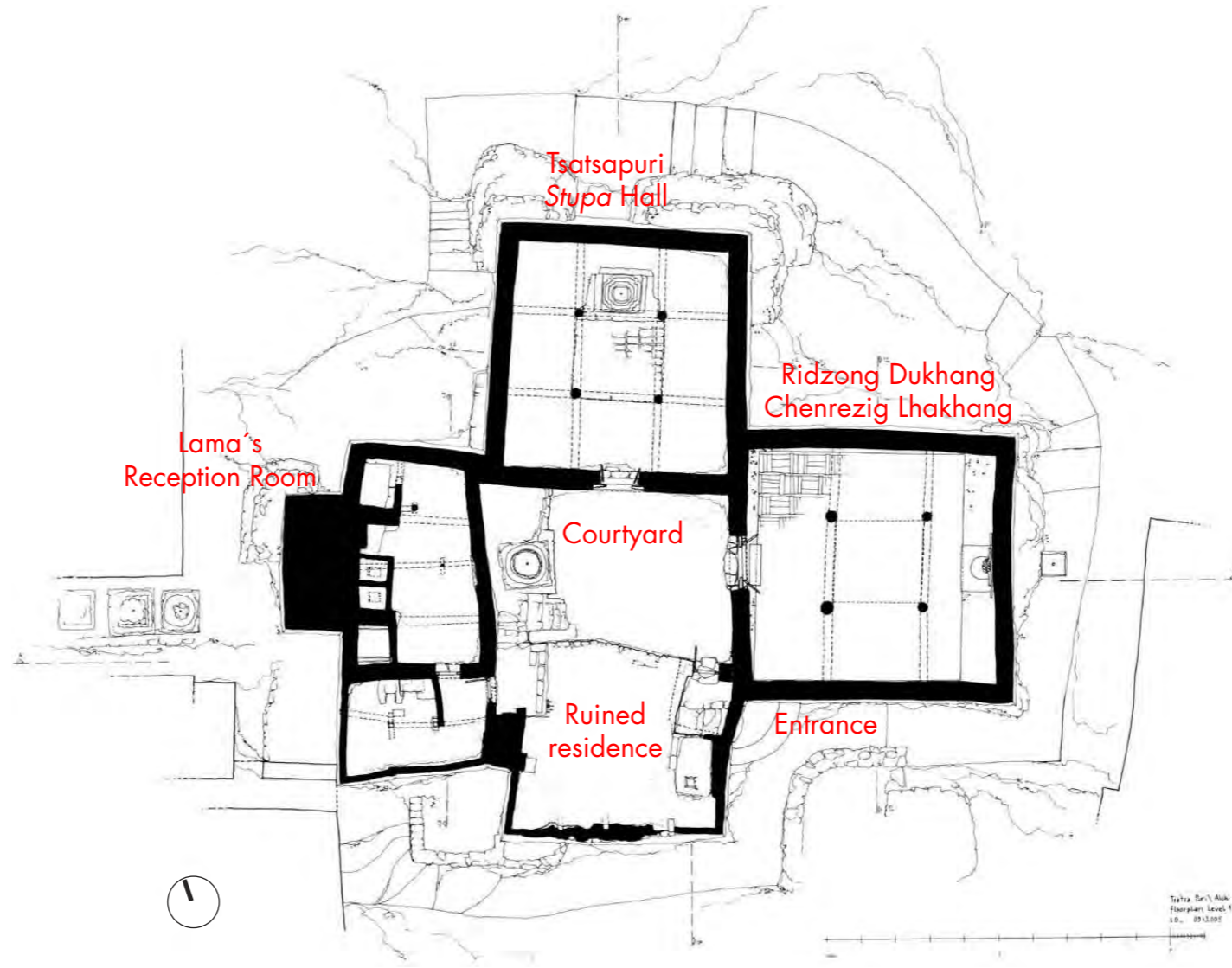
Project office Germany:  
Berliner Str. 68  
13189 Berlin, Germany

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# Alchi Tsatsapuri

Preliminary Report by André Alexander



**Introduction**

In one of the most beautiful places in Ladakh, in the valley of Alchi by the banks of the Indus river, stands the monastery of Alchi Choskhor associated with the Buddhist saint Rinchen Zangpo. The monastery is justly world-famous for its superb wall-paintings, dating to the early 13th century. Just a few minutes walk towards the mountains stands another monastery that has remained almost unknown, even though it harbors art and architecture of comparable quality. THF came first time to Ladakh in 2003 on an exploratory mission. At that time, a young man we had met in the central Buddhist temple of Leh, the Tsukla-khang, told us about a temple in Alchi with remarkable wall-paintings that was partly owned by his family. When we saw it, we were completely stunned by the amount of very beautiful paintings, but also moved because they were in such a deplorable state of decay. This temple, known as Tsatsapuri, appeared abandoned. An old lady living nearby had the keys and took care of it as good as she could.

In 2005 we could organize a survey of Tsatsapuri, and in 2007 the first intervention took place.

**Site history**

Little is known about the history of Tsatsapuri yet. The inscriptions on the wallpaintings connect the site to a lama of the Drigung school of Tibetan Buddhism, who lived around the turn of the 13th century. The upstairs room on the western side has murals on the northwest wall showing scenes from the life of Drigung Kyopa Jigten Gonpo Richen Pal ('Bri gung skyob pa 'jig rten mgon po Rin chen dpal 1143-1217), and the inscription mentions his nephew 'Bri gung gling pa, one of the masters responsible for the spread of the Drigung Kagyu school in the western Himalayas in the 13th century. The Drigung school is a sub-school of the Kagyüpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (bKa'-brgyud-pa). A pupil of Phagmodrugpa founded the monastery at Drigung-til in Central Tibet in 1179. The Drigung school became subsequently very prominent in Tibet, and reached Ladakh already in the 13th



Approach from the North



Valley overview from Southeast



Appearance looking from East



Complex from south with entrance



THF team, Ridzong monks, villagers and friends

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century (for the Drigung school, see Snellgrove and Richardson 1995 (reprint): *A Cultural History of Tibet*; Luczanits 2004: *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay – Early Western Himalayan Art*; Luczanits 2006: *A First Glance at Early Gelukpa Painting*).

At some time in the past, monk caretakers lived both here and in a residential building just outside. Later, though we do not know when or why, the site seems to have become the private property of the local Thongspon family. Thongspon is the title of the king's local tax collector, so during the monarchy the family must have been fairly influential. It is possible that the Thongsponpa-s were the original sponsors of the monastery, but the present head of the family, Mr. Murup Dorje Thongspon, has no information about the early history of the site. About 100 years ago, the eastern dukhang was given to the Gelukpa school monastery of Ridzong.

The form of the three-storey dukhang, and some of the details in the architecture, such as the willow stick roof cornice and the deployment of lion brackets, point to an early date for the founding (13th-15th centuries), relating it to the famous Alchi monastery nearby. Stylistically, many of the details in the wall-paintings, for example the lower ornamental edging pattern in the *stupa* hall, also relate Tsatsapuri to the 13th century art of Alchi and Wanla.

There are more inscriptions in the complex that may help us to understand the site history. One is cursive writing on the north-eastern wooden column in the reception hall, recording offerings by villagers apparently made during the construction of the temple.

Another very damaged inscription on the south-west corner of the reception hall could so far not be read.

A preliminary interpretation on the base of paintings, inscriptions and architecture would suggest that the reception building on the west side and the central *stupa* hall were built sometime around the 13th-14th century (and no later than the 15th century). The eastern building appears to be the latest, as it was built attached to the existing walls of the *stupa* hall. In it the iconography of the *stupa* hall is repeated but by different artists, so we may date it tentatively to the period 14th-15th century.

## Site description

The Tsatsapuri temple complex rests on a rocky outcrop in the uppermost village in the area. It consists of three shrine buildings and a ruined residential building grouped around a central courtyard.

The western part is a three-storied building

that is a simpler version of the famous Sum-tseg (three-tier) buildings in lower Alchi and Wanla. It is built to a square plan and has four pillars, so typologically the ground plan conforms to the Tibetan standard design for a chapel, the 4-pillar-8-beam room, ka-bzhi rdung-brgyad (for a typology of Tibetan-style Buddhist temples, see Alexander 2005: *The Temples of Lhasa*). It is locally referred to as dukhang (assembly hall), because monks from Ridzong monastery come every two years to assemble in the temple and perform *puja*.

The northern building is slightly smaller and has only one floor and a lantern. It is built to a square plan with four pillars, and a clay *stupa* stands in the back across the entrance. In Indian Buddhist architecture, this would be called a chaitya hall (or *stupa* hall, see Tadjell 1990, *The History of Architecture in India*). Adaptions of Indian chaitya halls can be found in early Tibetan and Ladakhi temple building, seen by the present author for example at Zhva'i Lhakhang in Tibet (9th century), and in Ladakh at Nyerma (10th c.), Alchi Dukhang (early 13th c.) and Sasspol-tse (ca. 13th c.).

The east side building does not conform to the standard Tibetan typology of chapel buildings. It is rectangular in shape, with an outward protruding sanctum space where a large Kalachakra Mandala has been painted. In front of it are the remains of a traditional Ladakhi clay stove, and soot on the beams above it show that this stove has been in use for some time. Directly underneath on the ground floor is another, larger stove, which when in use would have been an excellent form of heating for the room above. The ground floor is undecorated. The upper floor is painted on all sides, and as the paintings are more or less preserved, we know that the shape of the room is original. This building is locally called the gönkhang, i.e. the chapel of the fierce protector deities. However, the iconograph program of the wall-paintings is incompatible with gönkhang usage. The paintings are mainly narrative, the paintings are mainly narrative. The lay-out, the existence of the stoves and the narrative paintings point to the fact that the room was designed as a room for a lama, where he would have resided and perhaps also received visitors, therefore we will refer to this building as the reception room.

In recent years, the Thongspon family have shifted their traditional "Lhato", here a mountain shrine consisting of a wooden pole as core element, to this room, and have since referred to it as Lhato Lhakhang. Once a year they bring juniper twigs, white scarfs (khatag) and other offerings for the deity believed to reside in the Lhato pole.

Another *stupa* stands in the open courtyard. This appears to be a later construction, as it blocks the original (and now walled-in) central doorway of the kitchen below the lama's room.

Another *stupa* stands in the open courtyard.

To the south of it is a ruined building formerly used as a residence. No traces of early decorative art and architecture could be found, suggesting that it has indeed been built just to serve as a simple residence, and that it could be much younger than the other buildings.

The entire complex forms a cross-shape, with three chapels and a residential buildings all facing a central courtyard (somewhat resembling the Tibetan Zhva'i Lhakhang, see Alexander 2008: *Empire Road*). Because the Dukhang appears later, and the ruin cannot be dated, we cannot confirm that the complex has been planned from the beginning as it appears now.

## Building analysis

The entire complex is built in standard western Himalayan building technology. On a stone plinth, walls are built from adobe mud bricks (format 33x20.2x5.3cm). The reception hall has a wall thickness of one brick layer, and the other two buildings of two bricks (on the east wall of the *stupa* hall, where the original plaster has fallen off, the bricks appear to be laid in alternating courses). The exterior is plastered with semi-rough plaster (finer than that applied to residential buildings) and white-washed. The inside walls have one to two layers of rough plaster and one layer of fine plaster. On the latter the white painting ground would traditionally be applied (for an analysis of the painting ground see the forthcoming report of the 2008 painting conservation campaign).

The interior timber frame is of standard Himalayan design, with wooden posts, brackets and beams. These are mostly undecorated, except for some carvings in the Dukhang. The Dukhang also has two "lion brackets", a feature known from other early Ladakhi and western Tibetan monuments (Alchi Choskhor, Mangyu, Sumda, Tholing). A short beam carved in the shape of a lion supports the main beam where it rests in the walls.

The ceilings in all buildings consist of boards resting on square rafters. The boards have been shaped by hand and appear original. One pillar in the reception hall bears an inscription relating to the founding of the monastery, a record of donations of food items from villagers for the occasion.

Still visible are remains of the original parapet formed

from willow sticks, as can still be seen at the Alchi Choskhor. However, probably due to decay, a new parapet was placed above it, in the typical Tibetan design still used in Ladakh today. The parapet rests on long ad thin squared woods, and is built from mud bricks capped with flat stones.

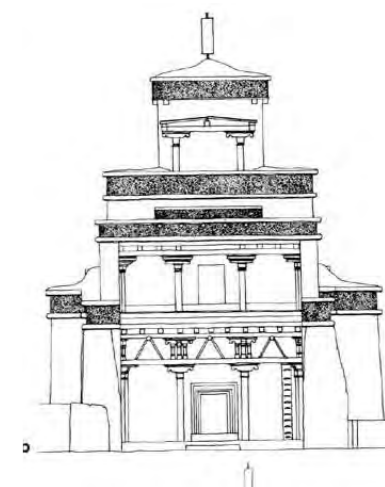
Tsatsapuri Dukhang, west elevation with entrance. Only access to upper floor via ladder.



Alchi Sum-tseg, south elevation. The exterior design and the three-floor concept are comparable, but the groundplans are quite different.



Alchi Sum-tseg, east elevation. Access to the upper floors via external stairs built into the wooden galleries and balconies.



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Circumambulation passage

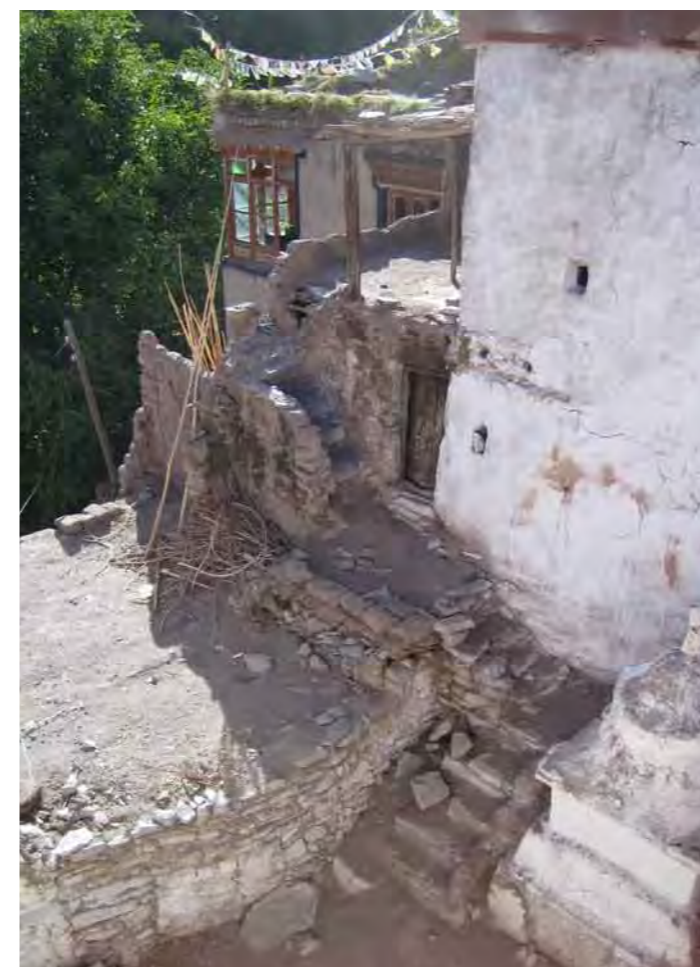


Entrance

Stupa  
in open  
courtyard



Main courtyard, from left: stupa, entrance to Stupa Hall, entrance to Dukhang



Ruined part and stairs to Reception Room.

### Problem analysis

Settlement in the timber frame has occurred in all three buildings, most dramatic in the Stupa Hall and the Dukhang. In all three buildings, the roof has leaked and caused serious damage to the paintings. It appears that over the centuries the water-proofing roof-layers have been slowly washed away. The Thongspun family and villagers have added more soil and plastic sheets to the roofs to combat the leaks, so that comparatively much painting has been preserved. The new lantern of the Dukhang has caused structural problems that need to be addressed.

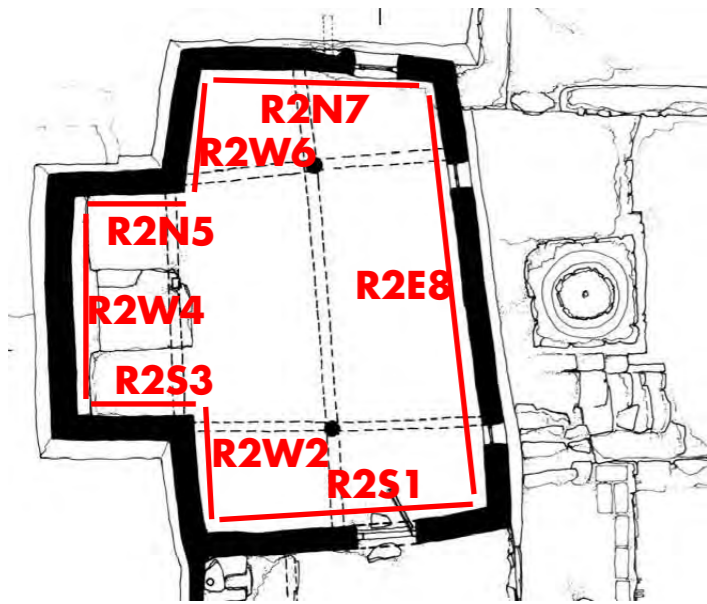
A necessary intervention has to achieve the following three points:

- correcting or halting the settlement of the timber frame
- water-proofing the roofs and improving roof drainage
- conservation / stabilization of the damaged murals

Further work would include limited retouching for local religious preferences; rebuilding the lost access to the upper floor of the Dukhang; rebuilding of the collapsed residential tract so that monks can stay here once more; and overall improvements in access and facilities.

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In this room, the entrance is original but the actual door is modern and quite recent. The three windows on the north and east sides are later (quite recent) additions. The former skylight (the original light source) has been removed and closed.

The sanctum area is, quite untypically, not facing the entrance. It is decorated with a large *mandala*. On the north (R2N7) and east (R2E8) walls there are narrative scenes. To the left of the door is a *mandala*, and what appear to be portraits of donors and protective deities. On the west wall between entrance and sanctum is an image of Amitabha with attendants, and between sanctum and north wall a portrait of Sakyamuni.



R2W6



R2N7



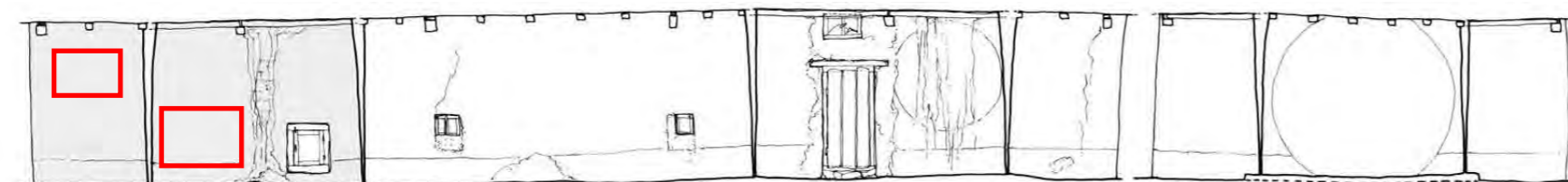
Reception room (second level)



Sakyamuni in earth-touching gesture (*bhūmisparśha mudrā*) flanked by two Bodhisattvas



Unidentified monastery, part of the cycle of illustrations of the life of Drigung Kyopa Jigten Gonpo Richen Pal



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Object:	<b>Murals - Reception</b>	Scale:	
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R2E8



R2S1



Shadakshari Lokeshvara with consort



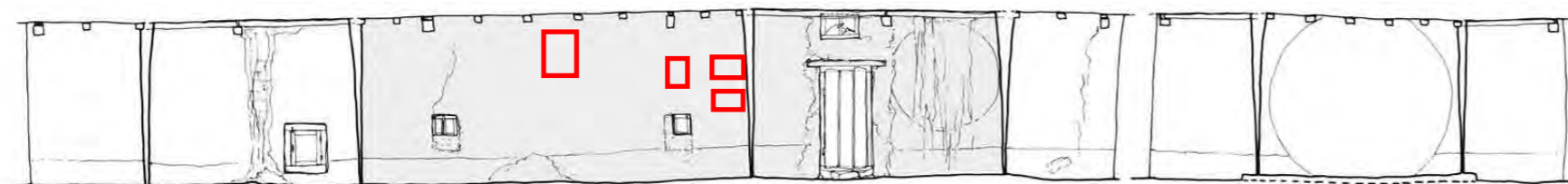
Detail, inscription damaged



Detail, rKyal 'dren ba



Detail



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R2W2



R2S3



R2W4



R2N5



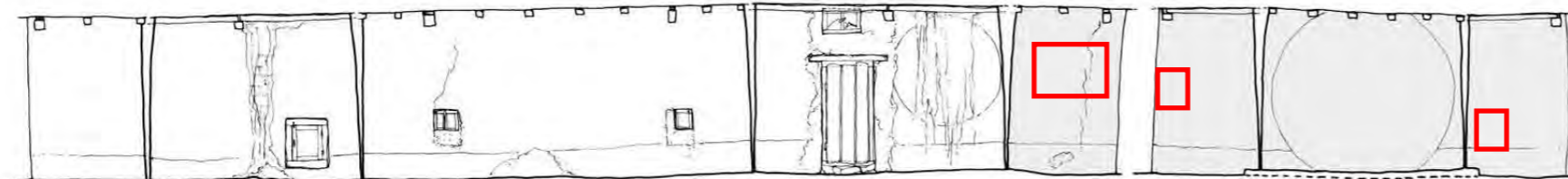
Amitayus the Buddha of Eternal Life, a form of Amitabha (in his *torana* are two peacocks, the vehicle of Amithaba)



Shadakshari Lokeshvara (a form of Avalokiteshvara)

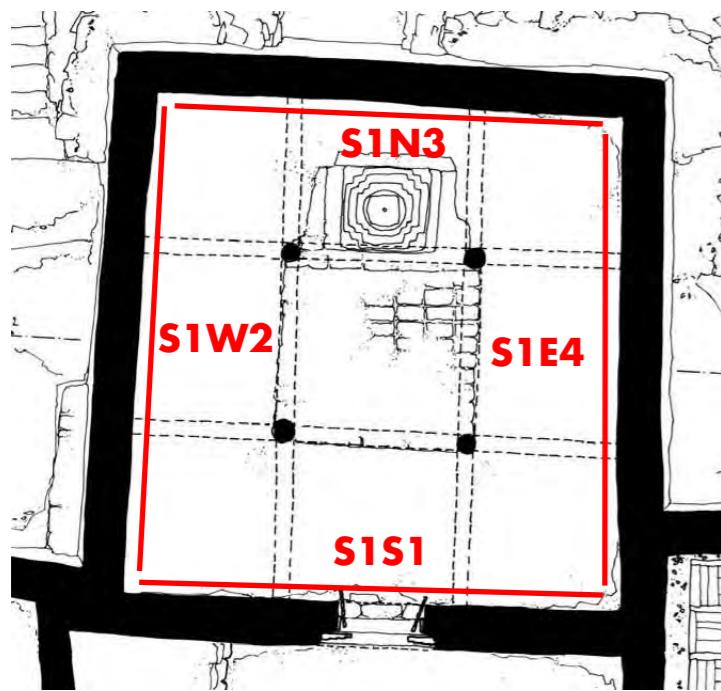


Vajrapani



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Stupa Hall 1st level floor plan

Iconographically, the paintings in the Stupa hall follow common arrangements: protector deities above the door, and to the left of the door portraits of the donors. We also find unusually painted depictions of the Four Guardian Kings left of the entrance.

The sanctum area is constituted by the white stupa and a large and splendid portrait of Buddha Sakyamuni with attendants on the wall behind. The white-washed clay stupa stands in the sanctum area between the north wall and the two northern pillars.



S1S1



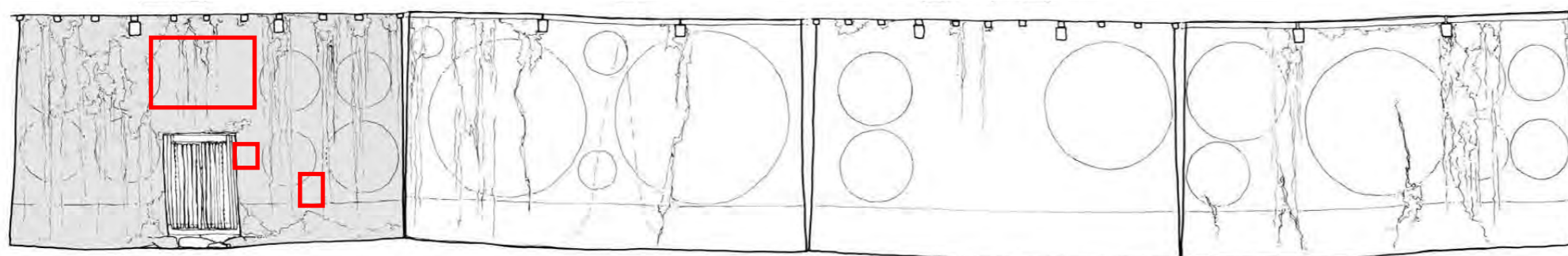
Mahakala, chief protector deity above doorway



One of the Four Guardian Kings



Donor assembly



Project:	<b>Tsatsapuri</b>		
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Object:	<b>Murals - Stupa Hall</b>	Scale:	
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S1W2



S1N3



Detail, unidentified *Mandala*



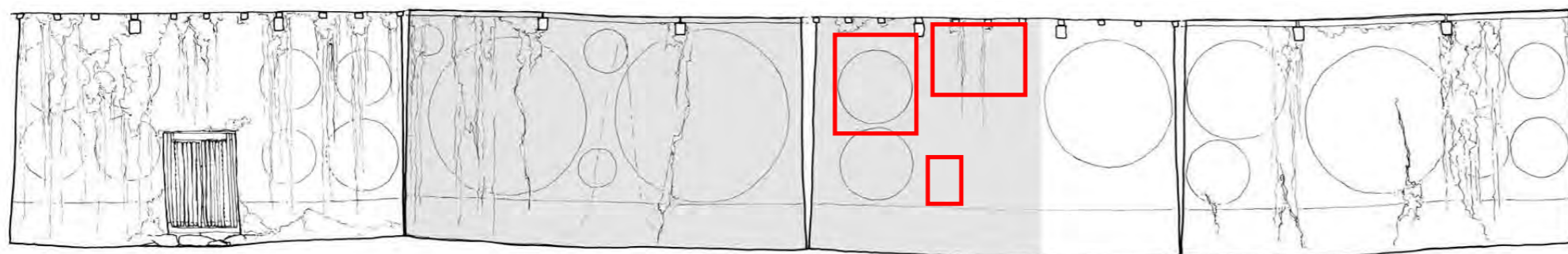
Eleven-Headed, One-Thousand-Armed  
Avalokiteshvara



*Tsatsapuri Stupa*



Detail of Sakyamuni on lotus throne



Project:	<b>Tsatsapuri</b>		
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Object:	<b>Murals - Stupa Hall</b>	Scale:	
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S1N3 - continued



S1E4



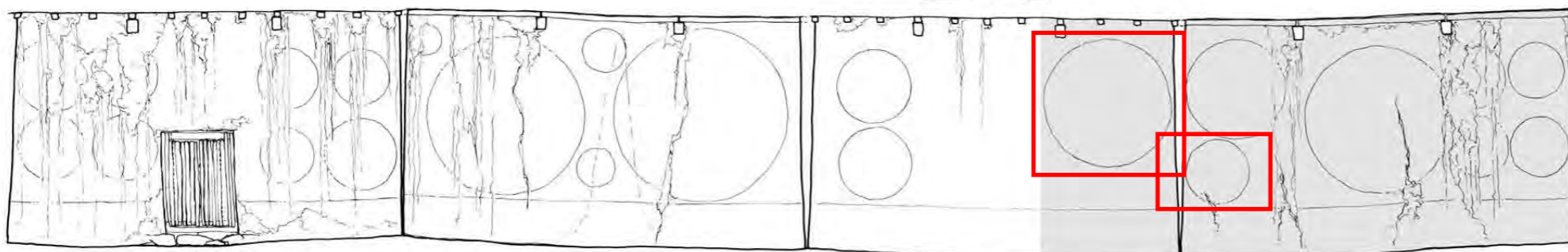
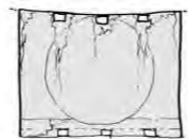
S2N3 - the paintings in the lantern are original



Mandala of the Six Chakravartin-s (Enlightened Universal Rulers)

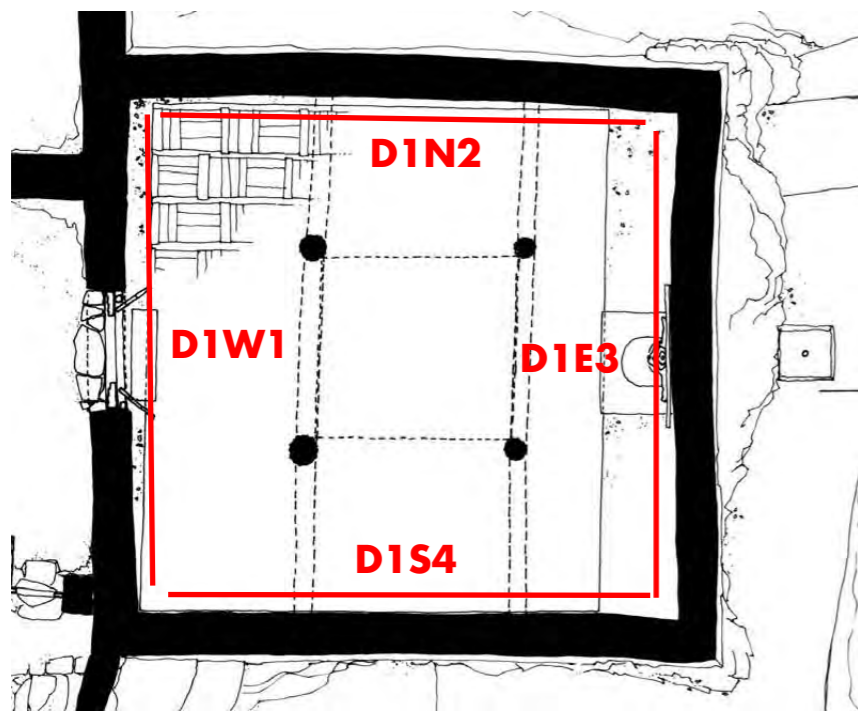


Detail, Kapaladhara Havajra Mandala



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Dukhang 1st floor plan



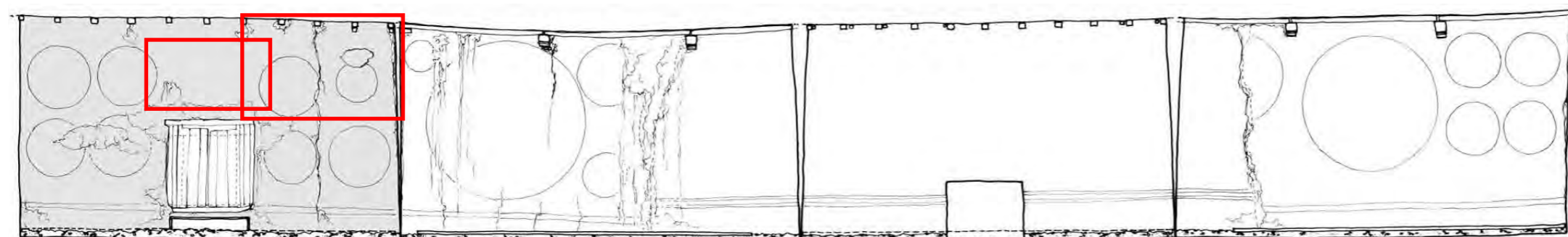
D1W1




Mahakala as protector above doorway



Detail of two of the altogether ten *mandala*-s on the west wall



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D1N2

D1E3



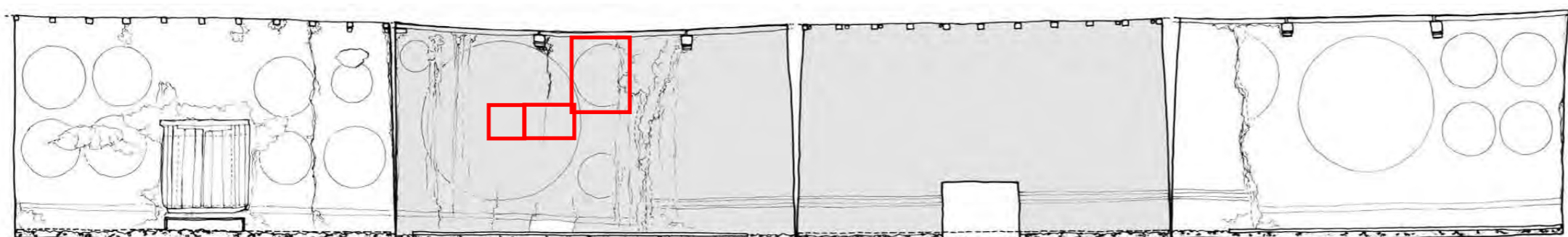
Detail, Manjuvgajra Guhyasamaja Mandala




Detail, Manjuvgajra Guhyasamaja Mandala



Detail of mandala with Sakyamuni in centre



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D1S4



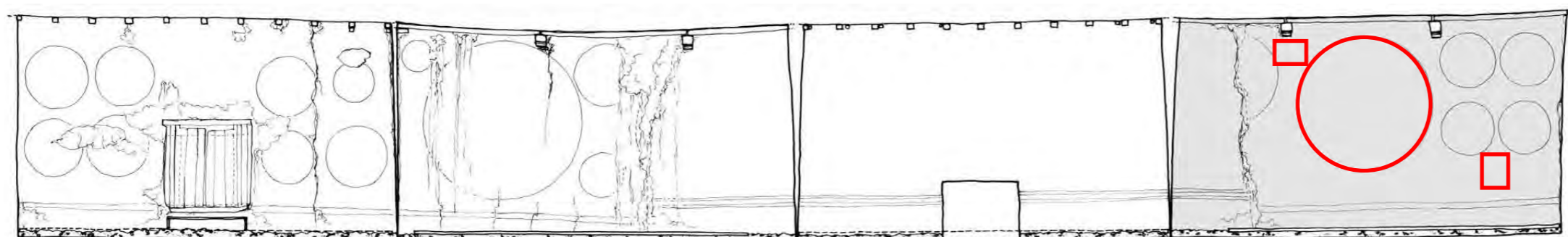
Guru Rinpoche and unidentified lama (maybe a Tibetan Drigung lama)




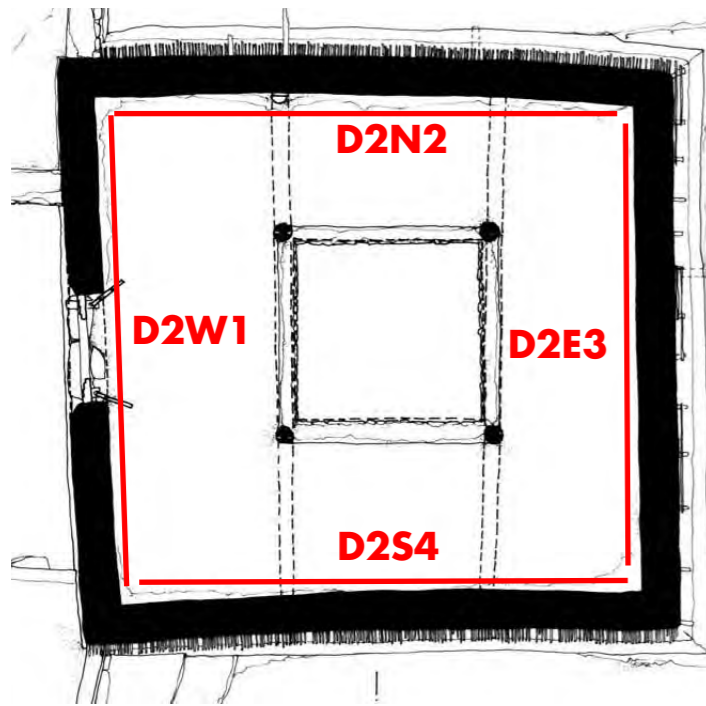
Detail, Vajradhatu Mandala (?)



A seldom-seen eight-armed form of Green Tara



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Dukhang 2nd level floor plan

The entrance (west) wall is filled with images of protector deities, ten of them principal images (including three Mahakala-s). The east wall is newly-painted with Gelukpa school images. The south wall has two main images, Manjushri and 1000-Armed, Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara, surrounded by small of Buddha figures, as well as an assembly of lama-s with red hats and a Guru Rinpoche image. The north wall has narrative scenes from the life of Buddha painted on the left section, the right section is new, and in the central section is a large Sakyamuni image surrounded by small Buddha figures.



D2W1



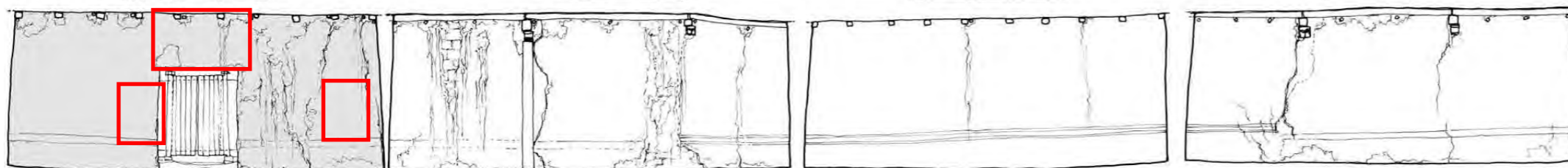
Yamaraja



Detail showing Heruka and consort (left) and Six-Armed Mahakala (right)



Four-Armed Mahakala



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D2N2



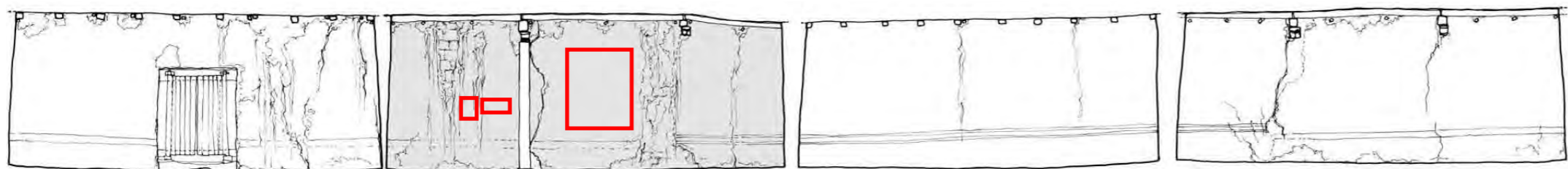
Detail of a rider from the narrative scenes in the left section of the north wall



Detail showing either three Buddha-s (indicated by the *ushnisha*), the centre one is perhaps Vairocana; or Buddha with two disciples (whose *ushnisha* is not yet fully-formed as it is drawn empty)



Buddha in the gesture of religious instruction (*dharmachakra mudra*), with two attendants and simplified *torana*

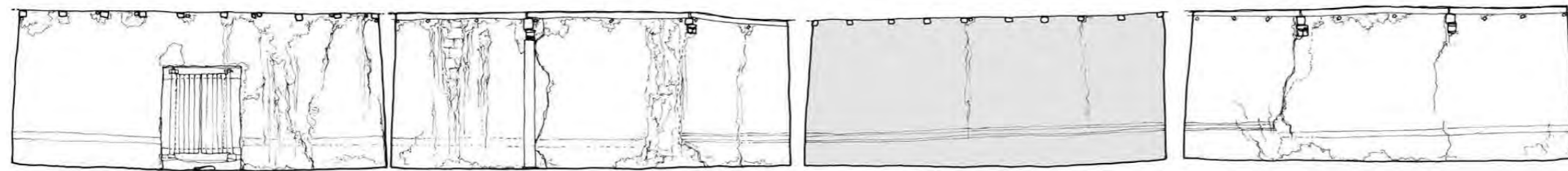


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D2E3

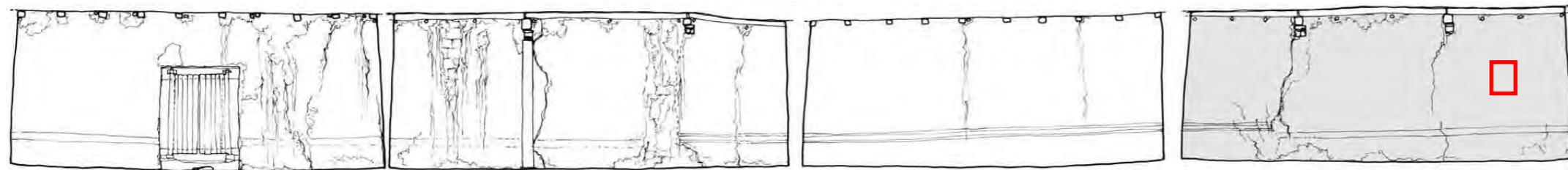



D3 - the murals in the lantern are new

Below: Four-Armed Manjushri



D2S4



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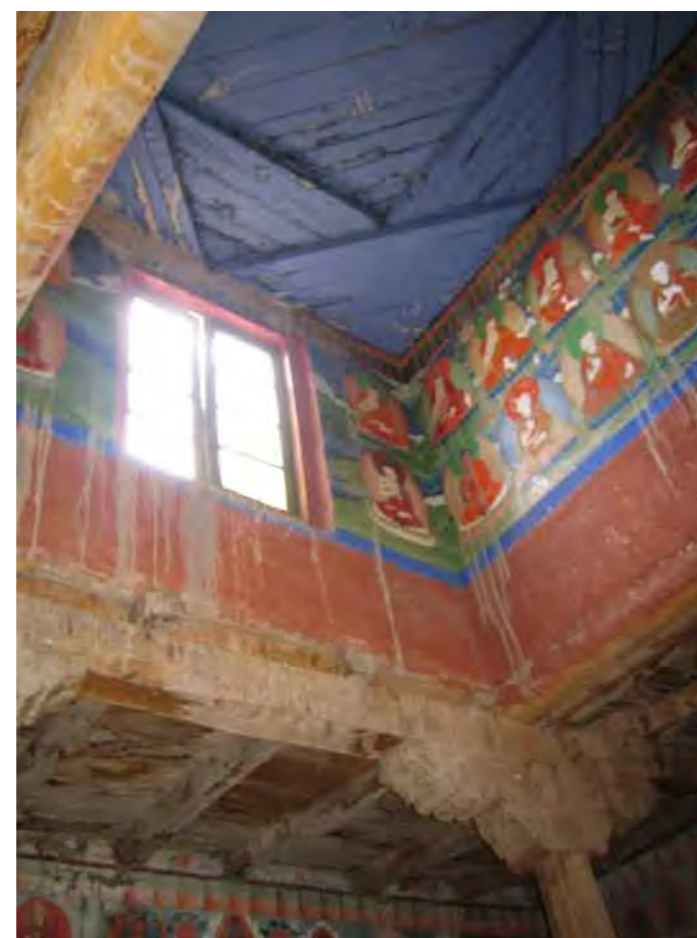
Dukhang 1st floor - damages at ceiling and walls caused by roof leaks



Dukhang 2nd floor - deformation of load-bearing elements



Ceiling, beams, lion brackets and capitals, Dukhang 2nd floor level



A recent reconstruction of the third level lantern has been unsuccessful - it is already leaking

### Structural damages (interior)

The main reason for most of the structural damages is the deplorable condition of the three roofs. Because the original water-proofing system has largely disintegrated, water seeps into ceilings and walls. The results are that timber elements are subject to rot and weakening, and the mud plaster is partly washed away. Recent repair attempts have only aggravated the problem.

The interiors often show large and deep reaching cracks in the walls in the area of beam supports. The load bearing parts of the wall have become weak, accelerating the deformation of the timber frame. The entire structural systems continues a deformation process, which - if it is not reversed in time - can lead to a collapse. Discoloration of the ceiling planks shown above point out the frequent and intense water leaks.

### TIBET HERITAGE FUND INTERNATIONAL

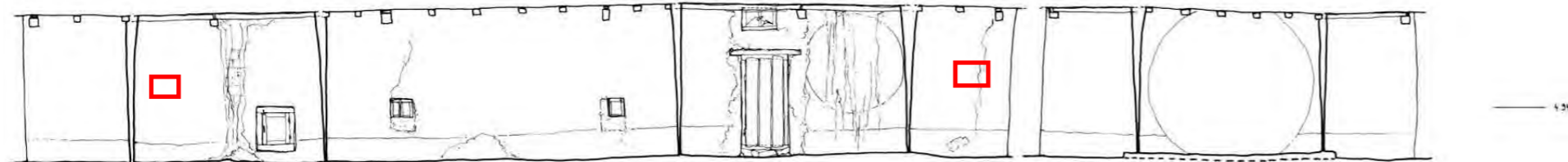
Project:	<b>Tsatsapuri</b>		
Location:	<b>Alchi</b>		
Object:	<b>Structural damages</b>	Scale:	
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Flaking paintlayer



Flaking paintlayer, cracks



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Object:	<b>Types of Damage</b>	Scale:	
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Roof of the *Stupa* hall



Roof drainage of Dukhang

### Structural Damages - Roof structure

Generally spoken, most of the serious damages occur in the roof areas. Besides the disintegrated waterproofing capacity of roofs and lanterns, the drainage systems and parapets have disintegrated.

The former Reception hall is particularly affected. The veranda is held up only by emergency props to prevent collapse. The timber elements are partly exposed to the weather.

Large water damage has occurred on the outside of the northern wall of the Reception room. The layers of plaster are washed away completely and the basic structure of adobe bricks emerges. The internal wall shows corresponding damage.



Damaged north wall of Reception room



Veranda of the Reception hall

### TIBET HERITAGE FUND INTERNATIONAL

Project:	<b>Tsatsapuri</b>		
Location:	<b>Alchi</b>		
Object:	<b>Structural damages</b>	Scale:	
Survey:		Date:	<b>9/2005</b>
Drawing:		Page:	33

## THF Alchi Tsatsapuri team 2005

André Alexander, Ladakh program manager and THF co-director: building analysis and documentation  
 Konchok Rafstan: local program co-ordinator  
 Suzy Hesse, Technical High School Erfurt, candidate for diploma in restoration: assessment of painting condition

Lucia Gratz, architecture student (funded by ASA program): site survey and analysis

Stobdan, local, trained by THF in survey and drafting: site survey

Lharitso: photography

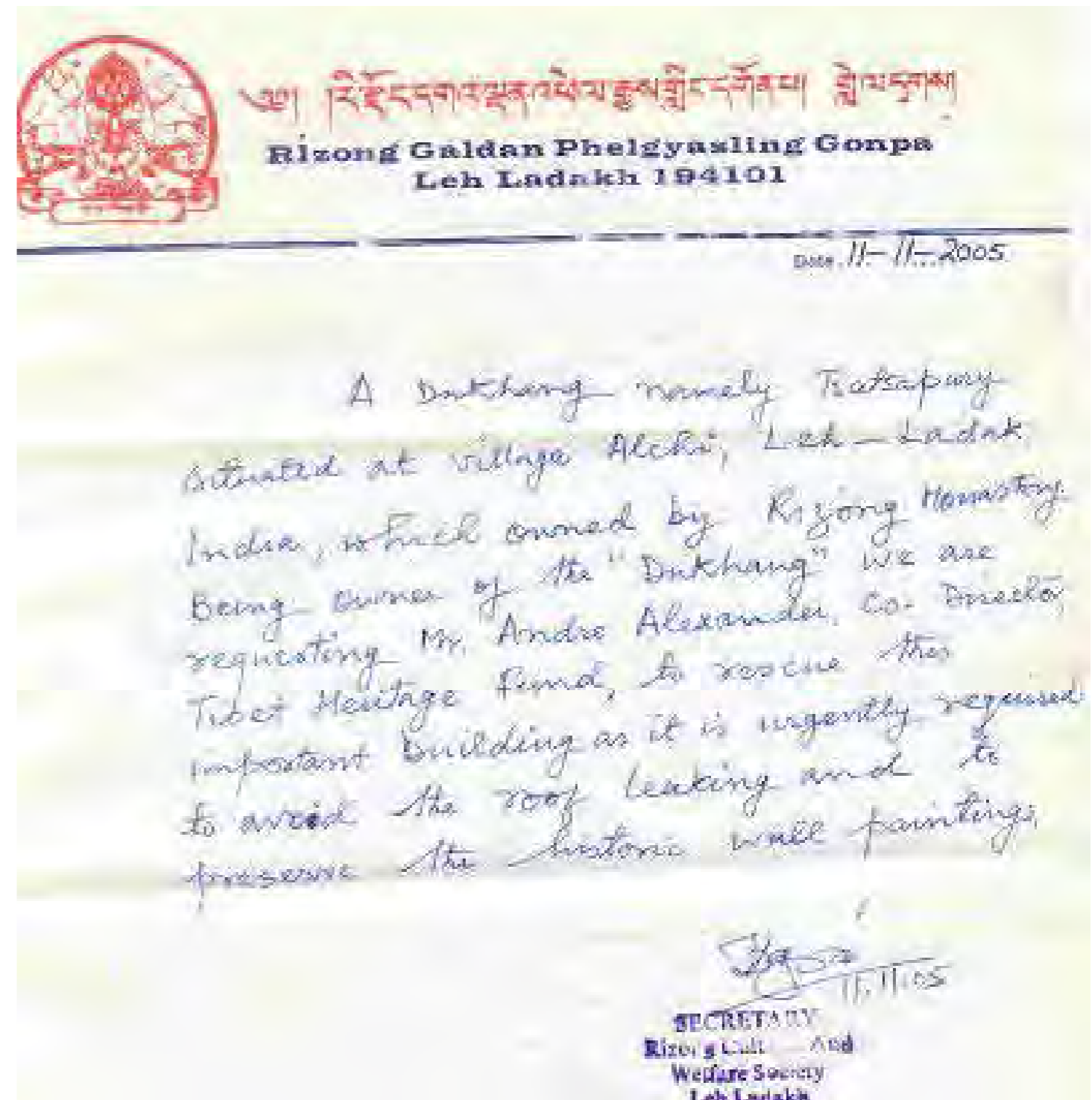
Jamyang Tarchin, local master craftsman: building analysis

Tsering Dorje, local master carpenter: building analysis

Thanks to Matthew Akester for his study of some of the inscriptions, and identification of the names mentioned.

Lucia Gratz and Stobdan stayed several weeks in Alchi, hosted by the caretaker family, and prepared the very detailed measured drawings.

Photos by André Alexander and Lucia Gratz. Uli Ulbrich helped to finalize the report.



THF builds new parapet, Leh

Examples of THF project work in the old town of Leh 2005



Traditional roof water-proofing, Sofi House



Restoration of historic timber frame, Sofi House

TIBET HERITAGE FUND INTERNATIONAL			
Project:	<b>Tsatsapuri</b>		
Location:	<b>Alchi</b>		
Object:	<b>Budget</b>	Scale:	
Survey:		Date:	<b>9/2005</b>
Drawing:		Page:	35