

# The Monastic Compound of Nyarma as a Case-Study for the Conflict between the Needs of Modernization and Conservation

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## Introduction

The monastic compound of Nyarma which is considered to be among the three major monastic foundations related to the activities of Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diffusion of the Buddhist Faith in the Western Himalayas, is situated approximately two kilometres south of Tikse. Despite of its importance within the religious history of Ladakh in particular there has been no major documentation of the site and its related monuments since almost all the architectural structures are in ruins today. Some centuries ago David Snellgrove stated *that the temples are just empty shells today* (Snellgrove/Skorupski 1977:19) because the roofs of the temples had been removed long ago and all the decorations had started to fade away for centuries then (pl. 1). Soon after Snellgrove's visit Jamba Losang Panglung discovered some intact murals inside a stupa of the compound which he dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Panglung 1983:284ff). He also identified an older layer of mural paintings underneath, but the fragments were insufficient to provide any clues for the analysis of the original iconographic program. In addition Panglung documented some fragments of a clay figure, probably a depiction of a bodhisattva, which were lying among the debris inside the stupa.

During the last five years the author regularly visited the site and carried out an extensive survey of the archaeological remains. The survey included not only the ruins within the compound, but also the small chapel on the eastern hill which was named "Ensa" by August Hermann Francke (Francke 1917)<sup>1</sup> and the stupas and ruined structures north of the castle rock. Two temple-structures within this northern area, which is part of the village of Tikse today, are of particular interest. An analysis of their geometric orders and a comparative study including the temples of the compound made an identical pattern in terms of spatial configuration and proportion evident (Kozicz, forthcoming). Accordingly, these temples and

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<sup>1</sup> Francke also re-produces a rather sketchy plan of the Main Temple drawn by Joseph Thse-brtan, probably a local member of the Moravian Mission. Unfortunately it does not show much similarity with what can be surveyed at the site today since many of the architectural elements are simply missing. In addition to that every wall is only represented by just one line, thus providing no information about the thickness of the walls. It is a pity that the few sculptures, which were still intact at the time of Franckes visit, are not located in the sketch. Still the description is a valuable source since it testifies the survival of some of the figures up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

their surrounding stupas are to be considered being contemporaneous with the temples of the compound. Based on this architectural and archaeological evidence we may assume that the whole area south of Tikse has to be included into the historic topographic setting of Nyarma suggesting that the site once covered an area of almost two kilometres in length.

This conclusion is also strengthened by the survival of early murals probably dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century inside some of the stupas in the northern section of the stupa field (Kozicz 2007a:60ff and Kozicz 2007c/in preparation). Inside the compound just some fragmentary remains of stucco halos of the former clay sculptures – in addition to the already mentioned murals in the stupa – have survived on the walls of the former main temple.

While the lack of artefacts of historical significance has caused a decay of interest in field research at Nyarma by historians and art historians the author could recently proof the importance of the site in terms of architectural conceptualisation, i.e. the interpretation of the architectural plan as a representation of the ideal order of the mandala (Kozicz 2007b:41ff).

As a consequence of the mere absence of artefacts it has been widely ignored by the scientific community that both the area of the former monastic compound as well as the northern sector, today integrated into the Tikse community area, have come under pressure by the various interests caused by new developments in the fields of tourism, agriculture and different kinds of building activities. The photographic documentation from 2002 already shows the “besiege” of the compound by the new agricultural activities on the basis of new irrigation technologies. A similar situation emerged in the northern sector. Since the historical importance of this area has been completely ignored so far the situation is even worse there. Today new boundary walls cut through the area, disturbing the former order of the relics (pl. 2). One of those walls even passes along the former main wall of one of the temples. Most of the area has obviously been designated for the purpose of new housing. The invaluable murals of the stupas are still lacking any protection against the on-going vandalism by the children of the local community. Many of the murals were either scratched off or withewashed during the last twenty years and the ground floor of one of the stupas is obviously used as a goat-shed (pl. 3).

Inside the compound some building activities started to take place in 2003. The impact of this process on the remaining architectural structures of the compound will be the focus of this article in order to line out some fundamental problems which arise from the need of introducing modern infrastructures into historical sites.

In order to value the collateral effects of the modernization process in Ladakh on this highly important cultural site properly the author will first give a short introduction into the

architectural history and the spatial setting of its elements and discuss the new developments afterwards.

### Architectural History – The Early Phase

As recently shown by the author, the spatial orders of the Nyarma Main Temple (NMT) and Mchod-rten Temple (CT) are based on diagrammatic plans which resemble the principles of a mandala. This system is based on a number of concentric circles and related squares, which were re-organized as a horizontal sequence of spaces in order to provide ideal frameworks for the Tantric rituals.<sup>2</sup> The same principles of design could already be identified at the two related ruins in the centre of the compound (Kozicz, in preparation). Thus we may assume that the original 11<sup>th</sup> century architectural layout included the NMT, the CT, the Twin Temples (TT1 and TT2) and of course the compound wall. While the entrances of the NMT complex, which consists of several spatial elements and sub-elements, as well as the CT face the eastern hill side, the main axis of the Twin Temples runs SSE/NNW i.e. it is not in accordance with the cardinal directions.<sup>3</sup>

For what reason another ruin which is situated only a short distance away from the NMT must not be dated to the early phase can be explained by a) conceptual evidence and b) archaeological evidence. Conceptual evidence is provided by an investigation of the ruins of the lateral shrines of the former courtyard of the NMT. The southern chapel of the courtyard is not part of the original layout, because the thickness of the wall is 118–120 cm whereas the walls of the other early structures measure 80 cm. The bricks there measure 25x45x10 cm and thus are 3 cm higher than the standard size bricks of the early temples at Nyarma. In contradiction to that the remains of the opposite northern chapel are made of the standard size bricks (25x40x7 cm). The remains of the walls there allow the reconstruction of the chapel's original layout. The spatial elements of this northern chapel not only fit perfectly into the geometric order of the mandala-like diagram upon which the plan of the NMT was developed<sup>4</sup> but its position within the complex spatial agglomeration is also well explained. Since we may assume that the NMT complex was composed strictly symmetrically, the large temple in the south cannot be contemporary as it protrudes into the floor plan of the original

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the basic principles of design see Kozicz 2007b:41ff.

<sup>3</sup> The entrances of the two temple rooms face each other and practically form a unit.

<sup>4</sup> Going into detail of the geometric relations is beyond the focus of this article. A complete description of the geometric interrelations will be included in a larger publication about the principles of architectural conceptualisation in the context of early Vajrayana Buddhism (currently in preparation).

southern chapel of the NMT. (pl. 4) It should also be noted that the layout of this later temple does not reflect the principles of design of the early temples of the site.

Archaeological evidence for a later dating of this ruin is also provided by its significantly thicker walls which measure 132 cm. The fact that it does not show traces of any exterior plaster is another strange feature of this building which actually can only be speculated about. The most proper explanation would be that it had never been finished. (pl. 5)

The diagrammatic analysis of the plan of the NMT also provides clues for the correct interpretation of another spatial element which is attached to the southern wall of its external ambulatory. This space, which is roofed today, does neither conform to the geometric system of the diagram nor does it fit into the spatial composition at all. Since there are no traces of an identical space at the northern part of the ambulatory we may assume that this space is a much later addition, too.<sup>5</sup> (pl. 6)

According to the textual sources collected and translated by Panglung the monastic compound of Nyarma suffered from some kind of natural disaster in the early decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and started to decay. Probably the destruction of the southern chapel of the courtyard of the NMT was related to that event. Thus its reconstruction at a reduced size and the restoration of the decorated stupa inside the compound was probably undertaken as an attempt to revitalize the sacred site. We may also assume that the large ruin, which perhaps remained uncompleted, was built under the same pre-conditions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Since the external wall of the outer ambulatory, which is interrupted on the southern façade by this attached room, exists in its original state on the north side without any traces of a similar interruption, the result of the geometrical analysis is also supported by archaeological evidence. In addition to that there is a significant topographic step across the line of the ambulatories wall and no remains of any floor construction beyond that line traceable.

<sup>6</sup> From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards temples of such a size and monasteries were not erected in such topographic settings any more. Instead hill side positions which could be defended much easier were preferred. In addition to that the rooms of the later temples had significantly lower heights. The dimensions of the non-plastered temple at Nyarma point at a date for construction in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier, too. The construction of this temple must of course be discussed in accordance with the architectural history of the NMT. Panglung provides a date earlier to 1447 for the removal of the wooden parts, i.e. the roofs, of the temples. In this respect Panglung quotes the works of Snellgrove and Skorupski (op.cit.:19) as well as Luciano Petech (*The Kingdom of Ladakh C.950–1842*. Rome 1977:165). Snellgrove notes that this removal of the wooden elements is related to the construction of the Dukhang of the nearby Tikse monastery. If this dating is correct, it would mean that the stucco halos of the bodhisattvas inside the NMT have survived almost 600 years. Even if we take into account the arid desert climate of the Western Himalayas it is very unlikely that a piece of stucco work can survive in such an exposed position for such a long period as David Snellgrove stated. The author does not want to oppose the dating in general. Instead he suggests the reconsideration of the possibility that some of the temples received some protective measures over the last centuries. Francke, in his hand-written notebook, makes another remark (dated 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1917) referring to completely different circumstances. According to his note the wooden remains of the temples of Nyarma were taken to Shey, another nearby village, for re-use at the construction site of the Kongka Temple by local villagers. Since this temple was built much later (probably after the Dogra invasion in the 1840s) we may assume that the temples of Nyarma were un-roofed at least at two occasions. In this context it is particularly noteworthy that traces of red and yellow paint could be documented by the author at the main wall of the NMT's cella. Since the yellow colour is resistant against UV-light for a very short time (perhaps a few weeks under the local circumstances) there must have been some shelter at least above the cella.

The author would like to draw attention on one particularity of the un-plastered ruin, namely its orientation towards the NE. Such an orientation is highly unusual in particular because it a) completely contradicts to the standardized orientation which means that temples are usually facing East (in particular in the early phase of Buddhist architecture in the region) or South to South-West (the preferred orientation of many of the later temples). There is also no significant mark in the landscape that might provide an explanation for that orientation. Accordingly the answer to that question has to be sought within the composition of the temples of the compound, i.e. the site map. The result of a survey of the geometric inter-relations of the early temples is quite promising. In fact, the axis of the un-plastered ruin and the axis of the Twin Temples meet the axis of the NMT at the same point. The large scale depiction of the structures on the map reveals how this area in front of the NMT literally becomes the focus of these lines and thus creates the metaphysical centre of the compound. Since we may also conclude that the two major parts of Nyarma, i.e. the compound in the South and the stupa field in the North were connected along the eastern side of the fortified hillside, this focal point is located in the part of the compound where the major approach from the North-East was situated.<sup>7</sup> In this context it is necessary to recall the position of the “Ensa”, the enclosed chapel, opposite the NMT.<sup>8</sup> The visualization of the axes not only provides a proper explanation for the orientation of the Twin Temples. It evidently points out that by the time of the construction of the un-plastered temple the awareness of the importance of this focal point was still alive. (pl. 7)

#### Architectural History – The Later Phase

The compound probably suffered further blows during the periods of war though there are no records known to the author about what happened to the monastery when the Mongol armies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Dogra invaders of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century plundered the country. The roofs had probably been removed a long time ago, when in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a nun temple was erected right above the cella, i.e. the innermost sanctum of the NMT. In addition to that the

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<sup>7</sup> The large number of stupas north of the compound supports this assumption. It is also noteworthy that all the early foundations were built in distance to the agricultural fields. A connection of the northern part and the compound on the western side of the fortified hill would have caused a link road right through the agricultural fields. Situating monastic foundations in the barren lands not only saved valuable grounds for agricultural purpose but also allowed religious practice without distraction from outside.

<sup>8</sup> Francke mentions that the “Ensa” was said to have been used by Rinchen zangpo as a place for retreat and meditation. Since all the other major surviving foundations such as Tholing and Tabo also have their entrances to the East we may assume that the major access to the monastic compound of Nyarma was situated at the northern section of its eastern compound wall rather than at the northern wall. This assumption is also backed-up by the topography of the area north of the compound where a steep ridge separates the plateau with the stupas from the lower lying compound.

entrance to the former assembly hall (Dukhang) was blocked with bricks (pl. 8) and alternatively a hole was crudely made into the back wall of the inner ambulatory. Additionally a toilet was attached to the Dukhang wall inside the outer ambulatory. The western and northern parts of the compound wall completely disappeared allowing nearby farmers to claim some areas for housing and farming. A small lake emerged in the northern sector of the compound<sup>9</sup> now flooding the focal point of the temples' axes.

#### Architectural History – Current Events

In 2003 a new kind of development started to take place. A road was built leading into the compound from the South. As can be seen in the related photograph heavy vehicles were driven all across the compound. Right in the geometric centre of the remaining ruins a large basis of remarkable size was erected. Several piles of stone and building material were collected and distributed between the archaeological remains and the ground of the compound, which had been almost covered with round stones all over the site, was completely messed. (pl. 9)

The first new structure that has been finished is now occupying a prominent position closest to the former focal point of the axes. The construction of the small two-story building, in particular the stairs, the small sizes of the two upper rooms and the openings at the rear side on ground floor clearly reveal its functional purpose as a toilet. The construction of such a facility right at that particular point raises serious questions. Why was it built? Is it appropriate to introduce such an infrastructural building into the compound? What does this mean to the compound as a sacred area?

Dealing with these obviously problematic questions has to include the discussion of the recent building activities in general.<sup>10</sup> The new large building which was almost completed by summer 2006 is a new nun temple. The purpose of erecting the new temple was to prevent the on-going penetration of the site by farmers and probably also to re-introduce religious activities. Usually such purpose nowadays coincides with the introduction of tourism to a site.

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<sup>9</sup> Panglung makes a reference to an inscription found at Alchi monastery where a lake at Nyarma is mentioned. Still there is no confirmation that the lake we find at Nyarma today has already been there in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. We have to keep in mind that the foundations of many religious sites are related to water myths e.g. the Lhasa Jokhang. The changing size of the lake as observed over the last five years as well as the fact that the water is supplied by a tank in the west (observation by the author in 2004) and not by the small streams of the eastern hills lead to the conclusion that the current lake should not be identified with the one of literal source.

<sup>10</sup> Because of the author's particular interest in the old monuments the research conducted during the last years excluded these new developments as far as possible. I am grateful for receiving information about the new developments from Andre Alexander, Marianne Pecnik and Wolfgang Heusgen.

Given the historical and architectural back-ground it is quite obvious that these latest events were just another critical blow to the site. While the construction work has seriously disturbed the original order of the compound, the last art historical fragment still remains un-protected. Still the entrance to the decorated stupa is merely blocked by a few stones and the last halos of the clay figures of the NMT still lack any protection against wind and weather – not to speak about the vandalism against the murals inside the stupas near Tikse which above all are close to the point of structural collapse. Still the worst thing, at least in the opinion of the author, is the erection of the free-standing toilet. In order to value its impact properly it is again necessary to make a historic evaluation of this topic. Actually there is no source providing information about such profane aspects of daily life in a monastic compound of the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Western Himalayas. We do not even know where the cells of the monks were situated and whether those cells were arranged in a geometrical hierarchy or not. Nevertheless some clues on these profane topics might be provided if we have a close look at the ruins of monastic compounds from Bengal and eastern India where the architecture of mandala, the five-fold conceptualization of space, was basically developed from the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries on. An early example, where a latrine block was excavated, is the monastery of Shitakot in Bangladesh. The site map of this monastery reveals a square vihara-type layout with a latrine block attached to the back-side of the complex. This block is clearly separated from the monastic space and connected by a narrow pathway only. An identical solution for the position of the latrine was realized at the famous Pala foundation of the Somapura monastery at Paharpur.<sup>11</sup> This large monastic foundation already resembles a combination of the vihara-type temple with a central five-fold stupa-temple and has been related to tantric Buddhist activities in the region. While within the compound walls several service units such as dining halls and kitchens could be identified, the latrine is outside the compound again. As is the case in Shitakot it is situated opposite the entrance and connected to the monastic sphere by a small path only. We may thus conclude that according to the principles of early Buddhist temple architecture the latrine was strictly situated outside the compound wall at an appropriate position.

Now, what strikes the author in the case of the latrine/toilet at Nyarma is not the fact that a toilet was built inside the former sacred area, since the need for new infrastructure and services must be acknowledged. It is actually the specified position and the symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> We may note that Paharpur is one of the places where Atisha, the great tantric scholar, who was finally invited to supervise the re-introduction of Buddhism in the kingdom of Guge and Purang in 1042, is said to have spent several years of his life as a student before becoming abbot of Vikramashila monastery. Vikramashila was the leading monastic university of tantric Buddhism by the time of Atisha's activities.

character of its form. In fact it has a more significant position and size<sup>12</sup> than all the stupas within the compound – and this is what really affects the composition of the architectural remains of the site in a rather negative way.

The latrine symbolizes the loss of awareness of what daily life and tantric practice within the monastic community once was.

## Summary

As lined out there is an urgent need for the protection of the various remains of the former sacred compound of Nyarma and its related monuments which are not only endangered by various threats. The site itself needs to be secured. The erection of the new temple is probably not reversible, but in the case of the latrines (in this case the latrine inside the NMT ambulatory should be dislocated as well) an appropriate place should be found. The surviving murals and stucco halos must be sheltered.

In the case of the stupas in the field south of Tikse a solution should be found in cooperation with the local community in order to prevent further destruction of the valuable murals. In addition to that a concept for the stabilization of the architectural structure and the renovation of the murals needs to be developed.

## Future Tasks

The current situation of the monastic compound of Nyarma highlights the need for a careful approach whenever new infrastructures are going to be introduced to cultural heritage sites. In order to guarantee a well balanced solution which satisfies the necessities of modernization as well as the various aspects of conservation, a multi-disciplinary survey of all related matters is a basic pre-condition. In terms of conservation it should be taken into consideration that it is not only physical structures and relics which we have to deal with, but also a meta-physical level as we have to regard the Buddhist temples in particular as materialized representations of a cosmological idea.

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<sup>12</sup> The stair of this toilet is particularly noteworthy since no other structure of the original architectural composition of the compound was a multi-storey building. It is evident that different floor levels were used to separate the different areas of the mandala-like configurations of the temples. It should also be mentioned that in the context of Buddhist architecture the “stairs” have an exactly defined symbolic meaning and value – with significant reference to stupa architecture.



It might be helpful to establish some guidelines or restoration assessment methods in order to have appropriate tools that guarantee the correct procedure in such cases. Still, the key for a successful restoration and modernization of a cultural site, which will at the same time have a positive impact on its cultural value, is the understanding of its history. If there is no awareness for the general history of a site, the continuity on the spiritual level will be cut off and the site might turn into some kind of museum or, even worse, into some kind of spiritual entertainment site. It is a well-known fact that the culture of the western Himalaya region, which is mainly a reflection of the Buddhist faith, is one of the two major attractions for tourists (the other one is trekking and mountaineering). Accordingly cultural continuity is not only of major importance for the social stability but also for the development of tourism at a high standard.

The architectural survey and analysis of the historical back-ground is part of the author's current research project about the early principles of the architecture of Vajrayana Buddhism. This project is generously funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung). The author would like to thank Wolfgang Heusgen for company and support in the field in 2002, when most of the measurements were taken, Marianne Pecnik for providing valuable photo material as well as Anna Weber, Erwin Heine and Bernhard Hohmann for their company and help during the 2004/2006 field trips. The author is particularly grateful to Imtiazul Alam for drawing attention to the excavated infrastructure of the Somapura vihara at Paharpur, which the author would have probably ignored otherwise.

All photography and plan drawing was done by the author if not otherwise stated.

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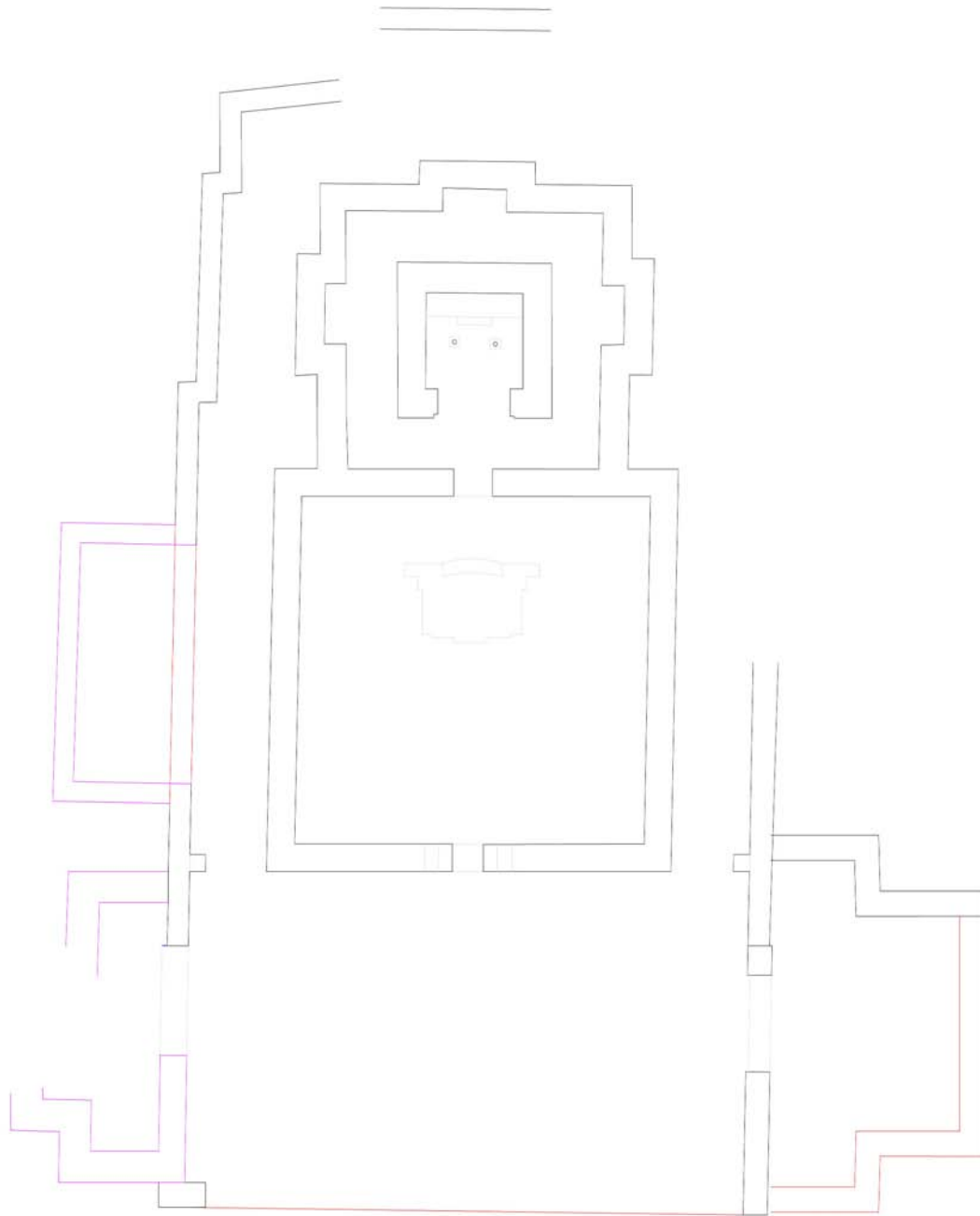


Pl.1: Ruins inside the sacred compound (2002). The castle is in the background.

Pl.2: The northern section which is part of the Tikse community area.

Pl.3: Whitewashed mural inside of one of the stupas (Mchod-rten) of the northern section.

Pl.4: Floor plan of the Nyarma Main Temple including the reconstruction of the right (northern) chapel of the courtyard.

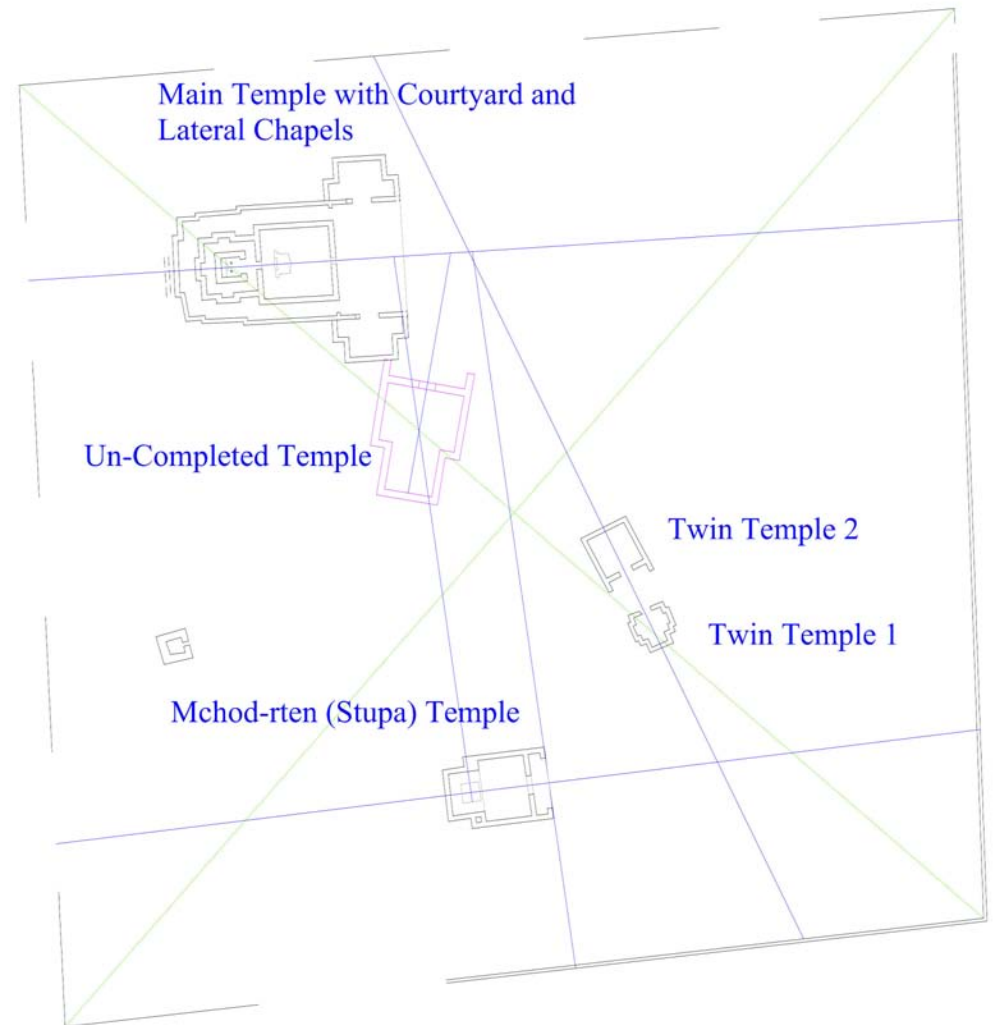


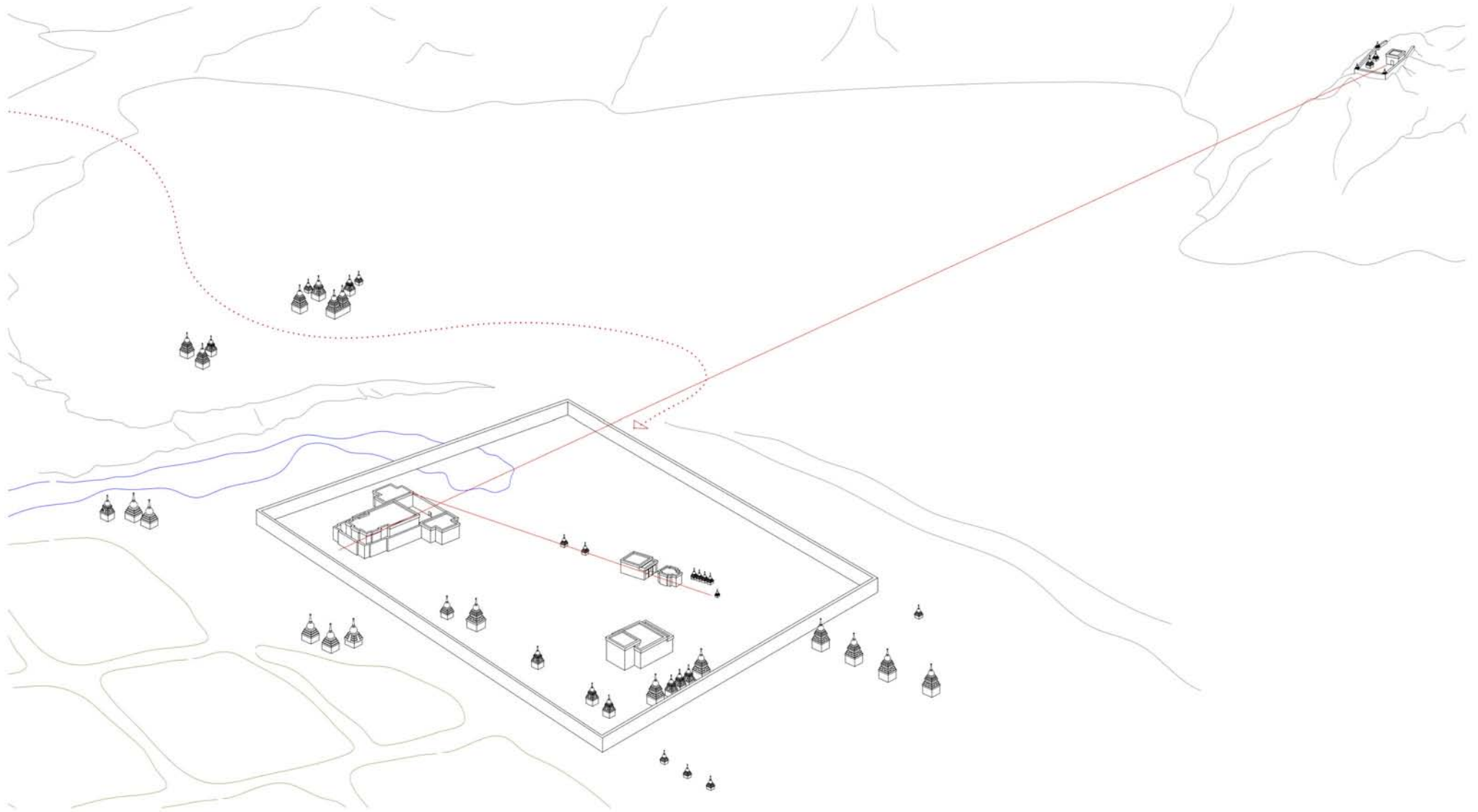




P1.5: The large ruin of the un-completed Temple next to the NMT. (Marianne Pecnik)

P1.6: Site map of the compound including the early temples and the re-decorated stupa. The compound's wall is conjecturally reconstructed. The axes of the buildings (visualized by blue lines) highlight the spatial configuration of the architectural composition.





Pl.7: Axonometric sketch of the sacred compound with its major elements excluding the temples which were not built during the first phase. The axes point at a focal area in front of the NMT. From this drawing it is clear that the entrance to the compound was most probably situated opposite the entrance to the NMT i.e. at the eastern section of the compound's wall. (Sketch is not to scale!)





Pl.8: The entrance to the dukhang area of the NMT is closed by bricks today. The remains of the mandorlas of the former protective figures on both sides of the entrance can still be seen.

Pl.9: Heavy vehicles and construction activities inside and around the sacred compound (2004).

Pl.10: Site map showing the areas of recent construction and building activities inside and around the compound.

