

# 12th Century Stupas at Nyarma Ladakh

*Roberto Vitali, Yutaka Hirako and Pimpim de Azevedo*

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The alluvial plain crossed by the Indus, the 'Lion River', where the Leh oasis, the centre of Ladakh, is located, is a stretch of land where a number of great monasteries stand. The plain conveys the sense of an open space that allows the establishment of great secular and religious settlements like few other localities in Ladakh. Anyone who has been in Ladakh is familiar with Hemis, in the east, and then Thiksey, Stagmo, Matho, Stok, Shey, all the way to Spituk in the west; all have been built on the great alluvial plain. None of these standing monasteries predate the 15th century. It is a reductive impression that no temple complex existed at an earlier stage on the plain of the Indus and that only in the lower part of Ladakh (that is, Ladakh Sham in southwestern Ladakh) were temples and monasteries of greater antiquity constructed. Temples were originally built at Shey and Spituk in the first half of the 11th century, but no trace of those foundations are extant.

Over a millennium ago, in the year of the monkey 996, Yeshe-Ö (c. 948–1024), the great king who left the throne to become a monk, and the supreme religious master Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) built Nyarma (Nyerma, in present-day Ladakhi pronunciation). This was the earliest temple complex set up by the Tibetan dynasty that had taken over the three regions of Upper West Tibet, including Ladakh, in the first half of the 10th century. Its founding followed the adoption of Buddhism by the king-monk as the civilizing factor that would secure the unprecedented flourishing of the people of his kingdom.



Fig. 1 Nyarma stupas  
south elevation

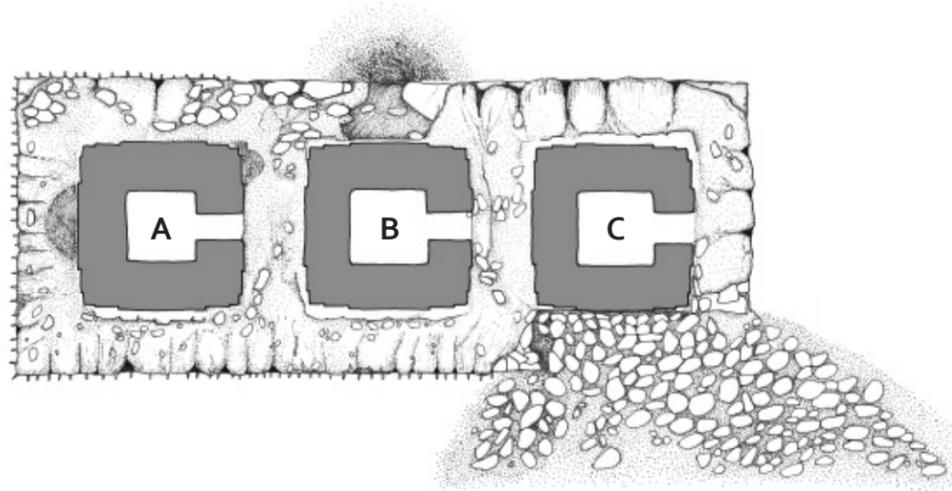
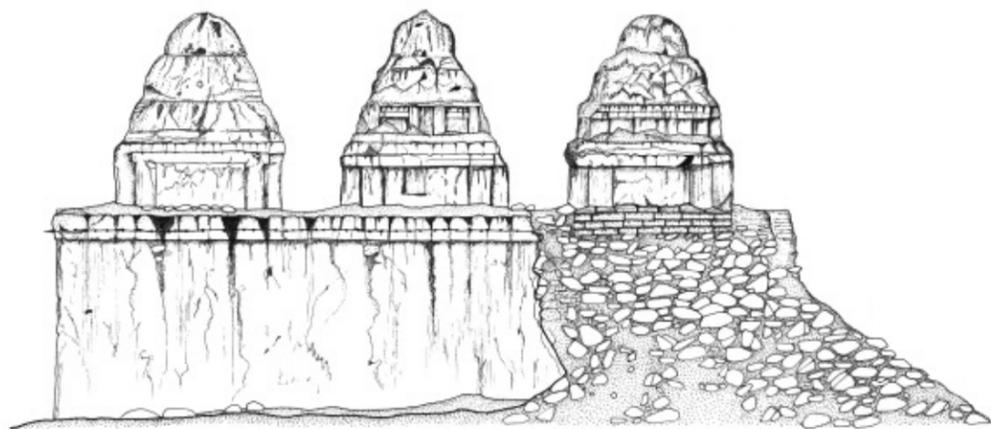


Fig. 2 South elevation and plan of the Nyarma stupas (not to scale)  
Drawing: Yutaka Hirako

Traditionally, the alluvial plain of the Indus—long before Leh was established—was one of the seats of the rulers who exercised their sway over Ladakh. The spur of Shey (near Leh) housed the castle that was the historical capital of the Tibetan rulers of Ladakh. Consequent to the introduction of Buddhism and the strategic location of Shey, Nyarma was built at a short distance from the seat of secular power. It remained as the Tibetan dynasty's steady religious seat until these rulers lost control of Ladakh during the first half of the 12th century. After, no evidence of Nyarma is found in written or oral accounts.

Fate can be baffling and Nyarma, the most ancient temple complex built by the early Tibetan rulers in Ladakh, lies in ruins, whereas others that

followed in the same phase, such as those in Ladakh Sham, still exist. There is no record of Nyarma's destruction, as if the event has been brushed under the carpet of history. Only guesswork can be attempted. One hypothesis is that Ali Mir, the Muslim ruler of Purig in southwestern Ladakh, could have been responsible for levelling Nyarma to the ground. This is based on the frail assumption that, being legendary for his wrath against Buddhist institutions, he may, ergo, be considered the culprit for the ravaging that drastically wiped out the Buddhist monuments of Nyarma. The weakness of this hypothesis is that other monasteries built in the area before Ali Mir's attacks against Buddhist Ladakh still stand without signs of irreparable damage.

Hence, even the period in which the destruction occurred cannot be assigned to anything more than an educated guess.

It seems that there were eight temples at Nyarma. Hardly anything remains of 996 Nyarma's structures—the dilapidated walls of five buildings are still detectable—but a closer look at ground realities in the area bordering the monumental ruins provides some surprise.

Not everything is lost forever. Reconnaissance of stupas in the contiguity of Nyarma's sacred precinct attracts the attention of a trained eye (a first survey was undertaken in 2013). At a distance from where one can catch sight of Nyarma's ruins, three stupas, built on a single platform made of stones, each have a niche that opens to a small holy chamber inside them (Fig. 1).

The three stupas are situated on the alluvial land between the Thiksey monastery and the ancient Nyarma temple complex, at a latitude of 34°02'43.18"N, longitude 77°40'24.52"E, and at approximately 3,260 metres elevation. They are located 1.2 kilometres to the northwest of Nyarma. The three stupas stand in a row on top of a rectangular platform measuring 13.5 metres x 5.5 metres and 3.3 metres in height. The stupa platform, situated SE-NW, appears to be oriented parallel to the Stok mountain range. The arrangement of the three whitewashed conic stupas face the snow-capped mountain range as if they are dedicated to the peaks of Matho Kangri and other mountains, this being an aesthetic consideration of the 'borrowed scenery' technique to create an awe-inspiring view capped by the landscape in the distance.

Each stupa has a square plan of about 2.7 metres and is approximately 3.3 metres high, with an open niche at the southeast side (Fig. 2). The holy chambers are approximately one square metre, with interior walls covered by elaborate ancient murals. The stupas are built of adobe and mud mortar. The adobe blocks—their large size measures an average of 12 x 26 x 46 cm—are a traditional construction material often used in the early heritage sites of Ladakh. The regular square base upon which each stupa is built becomes a quadrangular pyramid in the upper part, thus forming its basic shape. The exterior was plastered with mud mortar and covered with lime, which has been heavily weathered. Yet it is still possible to observe their outward appearance, formed by three layers of squared blocks with a hemispherical dome on top. There are rows of willow twigs—*taloo*—located at the stupa's corners, which most likely are the reinforcement parts for the convex shape of the upper structure.

The platform is made of a combination of round stones and adobe, bound with mud mortar. The round stones, most probably from glacial land formation, are not suitable for wall construction. They have most likely been used owing to their availability on site. The south corner of the platform has collapsed, possibly due to water infiltration. It requires urgent structural consolidation and restoration work.

The triplet of chortens contain in their interiors murals echoing, although in poor conditions, the Kashmiri idiom, with a deviation from the school's stylistic convention towards a sketchy, flowing, impressionistic style. The typical Kashmiri blue has

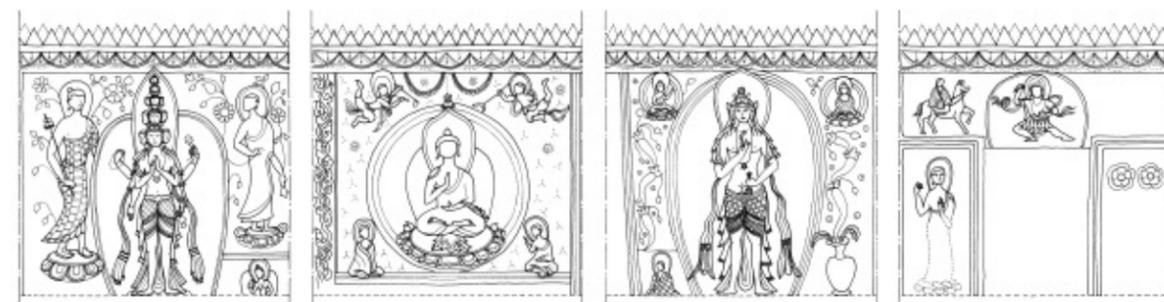


Fig. 3 Nyarma Stupa A (not to scale; from left)  
South wall: an eleven-headed and six-armed Avalokiteshvara flanked by two standing monks  
West (rear) wall: a Buddha with a monk on each side in the act of worship; above, two apsaras anointing him  
North wall: a standing Vajrasattva with two Shakyamuni on the upper corners, a Buddha in the lower left corner and a vase of plenty in the opposite corner  
East (door) wall: a two-armed Vajrapani (wrathful) on top of the door, with a form of devi known in Tibetan as Dorje Chenmo riding a horse on his left (upon looking); below her, a standing monk  
Drawing: Yutaka Hirako

disappeared, so that the black outlines that have survived contribute to the increased sense of a flowing deviance from the standard. The paintings also display patches of red upon the background that has mostly turned white. The rendition, overall, is in the mainstream of Alchi and Mangyu although without the classically of their style. It looks like a provincial rendition of a well-known idiom in Ladakh.

Stupa A (the one to the extreme east) has a Lama wearing patched robes (Figs 3-6). His body is inscribed inside a circle which is, like the lotus petals over the throne, one of the typical features of the Kashmiri style that has travelled to Ladakh from the Indian Northwest. The flowy, free spirit that is at the basis of these images is aptly personified by the standing Bodhisattva holding a stupa—perhaps Maitreya—in his right hand. This rendition breaks away from the more austere manner of similar images in the temples where the classical Kashmiri idiom is applied. There is a youthfulness commonly absent from the more canonical treatment of similar deities.

Likewise, the eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara of Stupa C (Fig. 10) follows the dictates of the classical Kashmiri style of Ladakh, only reduced to a more marked chromatic simplicity owing to weathering.

Where a superior sense of Kashmiri classicism is achieved is on the back wall of Stupa B (Figs 7-9). The composition of the seated Buddha follows the dictates of the style in terms of the manner by which the images are organized in the space. The

arrangement has counterparts in Ladakh Sham. The body of the Buddha, the circle into which it is inscribed, the lion throne—although all of them reduced to outlines—and the position of the side images are typically Kashmiri.

The registers above the sacred images on the four walls of all the stupas depict lines of geese, a motif that is yet another classic of Kashmiri decoration.

The murals inside the three stupas have suffered desecration. Most faces of the deities have been pegged out. This systematic damage makes the



Fig. 5 Nyarma Stupa A west (rear) wall



Fig. 4 Nyarma Stupa A south wall



Fig. 6 Nyarma Stupa A north wall



Fig. 7 Nyarma Stupa B (not to scale; from left)  
 South wall: sixteen Bhadrakalpa Buddhas ('Buddhas of the Golden Age')  
 West (rear) wall: a monk on a lion throne; vertical row on the left (upon looking), from bottom: a monk, a Buddha, a Tara, and another Buddha; right row (upon looking), from bottom: a Buddha, another Buddha and a prince (?)  
 North wall: sixteen Bhadrakalpa Buddhas  
 East (door) wall: a two-armed Vajrapani (wrathful) at centre top; left side of the door (upon looking): a *dakini* (female sky-farer) below and a four-armed Avalokiteshvara above her; on the other side: a standing Vajrasattva on top and a Buddha below  
 Rows of geese around three walls (door wall excluded) as uppermost register  
 Drawing: Yutaka Hirako

possibility of iconoclast vandalism most likely. Ravage accompanies decay. A sign that the murals inside the three stupas underwent deterioration in the span of some twenty years derives from a comparison with their pictures taken by Gerald Koziz in 2003 and published in 'Documenting the Last Surviving Murals of Nyarma', *Orientalism* May 2007, pp. 60-64.

It is possible that the paintings inside the chortens belong to a period occurring shortly after the Alchi and Mangyu temple complexes were built, if the axiom that provincality is posterior to classicism applies here. Or perhaps they were the work of artists who did not operate using the Kashmiri idiom faithfully but opted—willingly or unwillingly—for a

style less strictly compliant with the standard of the period or the preceding phase. What the murals lose in classicism they gain in immediacy. However, no set evidence can be proposed in terms of the stupas' period if based on a stylistic appreciation alone. Too often aesthetic stereotypes have been disproved by evidence eventually forthcoming.

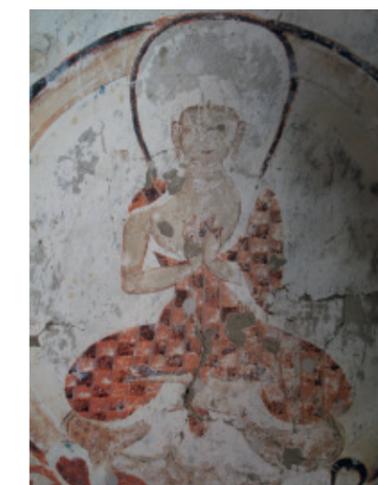
A carbon-14 test of samples from the three stupas has yielded the result that they date to 1169 CE with 95 per cent probability. This date fits well the constructional sequence of religious monuments in the territory. The date 1169 helps to confirm that they belong to a religious phase (probably short?) which occurred after the construction of Alchi Sumtsek and the Mangyu temples. Evidence inside



Fig. 8 Nyarma Stupa B north wall



Fig. 9 Nyarma Stupa B west (rear) wall and detail



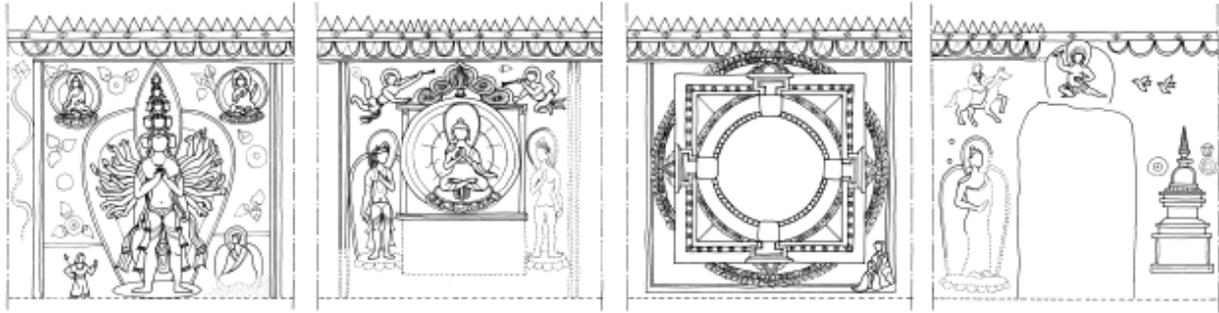


Fig. 10 Nyarma Stupa C (not to scale; from left)

South wall: an eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokitesvara; on the left (upon looking), bottom: a donor, and on top: a Buddha; on the other side: a monk (bottom) and a Buddha (top)

West (rear) wall: Buddha with an elaborate *torana* (gateway) flanked by two standing monks; above him, two apsaras

North wall: traces of a mandala with a donor (?) in the bottom right corner

East (door) wall: two-armed Vajrapani (wrathful) on top of the door; to the left of the door (upon looking): a standing monk (below) and a Dorje Chenmo (above); on the right side of the door: a Kashmiri-style stupa

Drawing: Yutaka Hirako

these holy structures at Alchi and Mangyu proves, as shown by current scholarship, that they date to sometime during the first half of the 12th century. And the orientation of the stupas—they open to the east, as was canonical during the period—is yet another small sign that confirms their antiquity.

The state of affairs in Ladakh concerning the construction of religious monuments was different from that in the other territories of Upper West Tibet. The Tibetan dynasty that ruled the lands of the Indus region together with Guge-Purang continued to do so in Ladakh after the Later Diffusion was terminated in the two neighbouring regions. At the end of the great segment of the Tibetan dynasty that reigned in Ladakh and that was responsible for the foundation of Nyarma, Ladakh went through an exceptional phase of temple founding during the rule of its last members. Temples at Alchi and Mangyu are signs of those golden years.

The three stupas document the persistence of this flourishing phase in Ladakh that continued at least until the third quarter of the 12th century. The 1169 date of the three stupas shows that despite the end of the Tibetan dynasty in Ladakh that produced Himalayan masterpieces, the phase that endowed the land with religious monuments conceived in a masterly artistic manner continued locally under rulers belonging to the local ethnicity—Utpala, Naglug, and Gebhe—who masterminded a resurgence of indigenous power. The three stupas are specimens of a final adoption stage of the Kashmiri idiom with features that are slightly less canonical in terms of style.

A twofold value derives from all this. One is that Nyarma bears signs of religious activity some one and a half centuries after its foundation. This is the only structural evidence that remains of a most important temple complex in the Himalaya of the northwest. The other is that a Buddhist monument—the three stupas—should be attributed to a period in Ladakh commonly believed to be devoid of signs of religious activity. The three stupas, so far as is known, are the last structures of this phase in Ladakh.

After highlighting in this brief text the importance of these stupas, the concluding lines here are meant to make an appeal. The main point of these few words is to call on individuals or organizations, if they care for an episode of utmost importance in the history of Ladakh, marked by the beginnings of Tibetan Buddhism in the region, to preserve the little that is left of Nyarma. Or else, nothing will remain of this crucially important temple complex but a few extant bare, broken walls. It is understandable that priority should be given to temple complexes such as Mangyu, whose murals are beginning to crumble—but one monument's preservation should not engender another's loss.

*All photographs are by the authors.*

*Roberto Vitali is a specialist of the literature and history of Tibet and the Himalaya.*

*Yutaka Hirako is an architect specialized in Tibetan architecture conservation working with Tibet Heritage Fund as programme director since 1998.*

*Pimpim de Azevedo is a Tibetan architecture conservator who co-founded Tibet Heritage Fund with André Alexander in 1996.*