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The Paintings of the Caves of Sa spo la in Ladakh: Proof of the Development of the Religious Order of the dGe-lugs in Indian Tibet During the 15th Century

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1. Introduction

The images of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, of the Bodhisattvas and Dharmapāla with their acolytes and attendants, and of the masters that spread the word of the doctrine which embellish the walls of temples and sacred places in Ladakh with their ancient gestures, sparkling jewels and glowing halos are not mere reproductions of the Buddhist iconography. They actually form the apparitional body of the divinities or masters they represent, and are manifestations of an existential level that is quite separate from the ordinary level in which we live. It is the level that is separate from the surging mass of the *samsāra*. The latter is often represented in the form of pictures through a frame of triangular waves which cross one over the other, delimiting the space where the divine images are depicted and marking the boundary between one universe and another. In fact, the Tibetan art, which is so inextricably linked to Buddhist religious tradition, consists in conveying symbols and the

manifestation of the very nature of the divinities to which it gives shape. Through the so-called 'opening of the eye' ritual, what is simple inanimate matter or an amalgam of water and coloured pigments becomes a lively entity. The images are vivified by this ritual that bestows on them the virtues of the divinities, such as knowledge and wisdom: 'the opening of the eye represents enlightenment in the Buddhist view' (Bentor 1996: 36).

Although pictorial aesthetics and quality are present and, as such, must be considered important, they are secondary to the function of the paintings themselves. However, virtuous artists may express their own personal knowledge of the divine nature of the subjects while painting. They depict what is conveyed to them by their masters, rather than attempting to imitate apparent reality. This is because the true essence of the Buddhist divinities, which is that of pure emptiness, can be caught only if it is anthropomorphised. Some artistic techniques also have a symbolic valence, which only reveals itself to the faithful or to observers after a careful doctrinal and philosophical reflection of the image they have before them. The lack of chiaroscuro, for example, in virtue of the widespread use of shading, cannot be motivated by a rough, superficial observation of the natural phenomenon by the artists, but rather by a careful choice of the symbolic valence (Lo Bue 2008: 691): as the divinities emanate light and receive none from the outside, the shadow does not settle on them. They have their own shining light within them, inherent to their very nature.

The depictions of divinities and masters, vivified so that their power is of benefit to all beings (Bentor 1996: 39), are set in pictorial cycles which form a precise, well-thought out iconographical programme. They may reveal customers, for example, reflecting their interest in a particular religious school that exerted a religious and

political influence on the place and in the region in which the paintings are located.

Ladakh was often wrongly considered part of Tibet, although the word 'Tibet', if used in a cultural sense, actually corresponds to a much larger territory than the one which was under the rule of the Dalai Lamas for over three centuries. Ladakh is politically an Indian territory at present, but culturally it is much closer to Tibet than today's India. It is the most western country of those which we can call Buddhist Tibet, but it was never under the power of the Dalai Lamas.

It was the reign of the Tsang that exerted strong political power throughout Tibet, completely upsetting the previous Tibetan political picture as a result. The Tsang was a dominion which held the greatest political strength in Tibet before the 5th Dalai Lama became the first abbot of the dGe lugs pa order in 1642. During the same period, Seng ge rNam rgyal (1570-1642), perhaps the most important of all the Ladakhi kings, extended the boundaries of Ladakh to those of Tsang, seizing Western Tibet and the Himalayan areas which had previously fallen under the control of India and Nepal (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: xii).

Between the 13th and 14th centuries Tibet was unified under the hegemony of the Mongol Empire. Ladakh was also nominally included in that empire but was de facto still an independent kingdom. This condition of independence was the result of the work of another great Ladakhi king, Utpala, who made Ladakh independent at the end of the 11th century. Before this period, it was probably a part of the confederation of western Tibetan states of which Gu ge was doubtlessly the most important, with its large cultural centres of mTho ling and rTsa brang (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: xii).

By the year 1000, the Tibetan language and culture pervaded throughout the region of Ladakh.

One of the first monasteries founded in Ladakh during this period was A lci. It was made famous in the West by Snellgrove and Skorupski, who were the first to publish pictures of its artistic wonders.

The period running between the construction of the gSum brtsegs, the three storied Temple of A lci (11th cent), and the 15th century are poorly documented in historical sources. A certain amount of supremacy from the 'Bri gung pa bKa brgyud pa order is apparent. However, its influence began to spread from central Tibet to the other orders and the kingdoms of Ladakh. The Ladakhi sovereigns were always tied to 'Bri gung pa, preferring it over other schools, but still maintained friendly relations with the other orders, assuring a steady balance between the clergy and the court.

A feeling of ecumenism pervades the artistic production of Ladakh. Important masters belonging to different schools, depicted in the 'Bri gung pa temples, show the opening of the bKa brgyud school and the interest customers had in protecting their ties with other religious schools.

However, whilst it was generally always the 'Bri gung pa who played a decisive role in Ladakh at a political and religious level, during the 15th century there was a relatively quick expansion of the dGe lugs pa in Ladakh, which also appeared on the kingdom's political scene.

The rising new order established itself in Ladakh around the first half of the 1400, a little before or immediately after the death of the great reformer. A number of the main disciples of Tsong kha pa, some of whom were originally from Gu ge and Ladakh, returned to their land of origin from central Tibet, where they had received his teachings. Their aim was to spread the doctrines of the master and found communities and monasteries. The zeal of the first dGe lugs pa

led to their school in Ladakh becoming well-known, and in the 15th century they managed to obtain the protection of the Ladakhi sovereigns, who had previously always had non-sectarian behaviour. These sovereigns patronized the construction or reestablishment of monasteries under dGe lugs pa's control.

This occurred both in Zanskar and Ladakh, where a certain number of monasteries, perhaps either in disuse or in a state of neglect, were restored by the order of reformers and brought back to life once again. The work of the dGe lugs pa was directly linked to a few charismatic figures who played a decisive role in the process of the development and expansion of schools in Western Tibet and Ladakh. Here I am specifically referring to the masters of the level of intelligence of Shes rab bZang po and lHa dbang blo gros, with whom I will deal with later in the paper.

The political power of the dGe lugs pa order experienced a period of decline in the 18th century, when the favour of the court, particularly that of sovereign Seng ge rNam rgyal, focused mainly on the 'Brug pa school, which was represented and made fashionable by sTag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho. In 1630, the year in which Ladakh conquered Gu ge, Seng ge rNam rgyal voiced his intention to snatch the monastery of Khrig se from the dGe lugs pa in order to donate it to the 'Brug order. Seng ge rNam rgyal's bitter grudge was motivated by an episode in which, while having an argument with his brother, he had sought refuge at the Khrig se monastery only to find that the monks refused to open the door to him. However, the sovereign did not go through with this owing to the diplomatic intervention of sTag tshang ras pa, who persuaded him to abandon his project and not let old resentment affect his political choices (Petech 1977: 52). By now the dGe lugs pa was a consolidated order everywhere, also due to the increase in the power

of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet and the consequent political support that they received. It did not lose its ability to take action and, on the contrary, became one of the most important orders in Ladakh.

2. *The caves of Sa spo la*

The name of the caves of Sa spo la comes from their namesake, a village to the south of Leh, along the main road near A lci, which joins Ladakh to Kashmir. The caves were an ancient hermitage, not far from a temple devoted to Avalokiteśvara located near the ruins of a fort. Only three of the five caves, which overlook the valley from the hill of conglomerate from which they were dug, contain paintings. The decorations on the walls of the cave, conventionally called No. 3, still reflect bright colours. The caves are a part of an iconographical cycle which is complete, whilst the decoration in the remaining caves is rather damaged. Cave Nos. 1, 4 and 5 are more damaged than the others and there are no paintings found in the latter two cases. For this reason, only cave Nos. 2 and 3^① will be examined.

The caves of Sa spo la were documented and studied by Snellgrove and Skorupsky in 1974, during their first trip to Ladakh. The result of their research, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, is even today used as a reference work for historical-artistic studies about the temples of Ladakh.

The paintings in cave No. 2, which Snellgrove and Skorupski had only partly described (1980: 80), will be portrayed and documented in the first part of this article. The second part refers to cave No. 3, and some additional data and considerations about the description of Snellgrove and Skorupski will be provided herein.

The style, the choice of the iconographical subjects, and above

① For the numbering of the caves refer to Snellgrove and Skorupski (1980: 79).

all the presence of the inscriptions make it possible to form an initial historical reconstruction of the pictorial cycles of the Sa spo la caves. Amongst the images painted on the walls of the caves are the portraits of a number of historical figures. Their identities, however, are not always clear, despite the fact that some of their names have been specified with inscriptions.

On observing the style of these paintings – comparable with that of the Guru lha khang in Phyi dbang, Lha khang So ma and those of Tsha tsha phu ri in A lci^① – but above all, on reading the inscriptions, it is possible to say that the caves could not have been decorated before the beginning of the 15th century. The iconographical cycles reflect non-sectarian cultural and religious behaviour that was open not only towards the 'Bri gung pa school, but also to Sa skya pa and above all to dGe lugs pa.

3. *Cave No. 2*

The entrance to cave No. 2 faces south-east and opens up onto an internal area just a few meters wide, with paintings on only two of the four walls. On the main wall, opposite the entrance, there are three large figures: in the centre is Śākyamuni flanked by two elegant Bodhisattvas (Fig. 1), Tsong kha pa on his left, and another image of a Buddha on his right, maybe Dīpaṅkara, the Buddha of the past, or sMan la, the master of medicine, holding an offering bowl (Fig. 2).

The image of the historical Buddha, whose face was roughly repainted in later periods, is surrounded by a double halo. The outer one is represented in the shape of a poly-lobate, inside which there is a spherical decorative element surrounded by flames corresponding with each lobe. Śākyamuni is dressed as a monk, with the typical

① The temple of Avalokiteśvara in Waṃ le, the Seng ge lha khang in Bla ma g.yu ru, and a small chapel in A lci Shang rong, must be added to this list.

cloak formed from pieces of fabric which have been sewed together and an offering bowl in his left hand. The right touches the ground in the act of calling the land to testify his awakening. This indicates that, during the experience of awakening, the historical Buddha was 'in the world' affecting it and not in a supra-mundane state of existence, as well as that his awakening must not be confused with rapture. The inclination of the faces of both Bodhisattvas, turned towards Śākyamuni (Fig. 1), highlights his compassionate behaviour. Both wear elaborate Kashmiri-style crowns, enriched with hanging rows of jewels falling over their foreheads, and two-veiled garments: a shorter, decorated one which leaves the knees uncovered, and another of ankle-length, drawn with a hint of a line which gives the idea of transparency. This triad is flanked by smaller figures of masters, arranged vertically in two columns, each of which possesses unusual and somewhat realistic features. Similarly, depicted subjects with faces, expressions, and physical characteristics which are very different from one another can also be found in cave No. 3, also located on either side of Śākyamuni.

Towards the right of Śākyamuni there is a Buddha, probably Dīpaṅkara, whose right hand is raised to ward off fear. He holds an offering bowl in his left hand, out of which protrudes an object. This object is similar to the one in the bowl of an identical figure depicted on one of the walls of the upper temple of Maitreya in Ba sgo, on which there is also an image of Tsong kha pa. The figure here, which is dark in colour, is flanked by two disciples in monastic clothing. The one on the right is depicted offering a strip of richly draped white fabric, perhaps a votive scarf. Dīpaṅkara, like Śākyamuni, emanates a double halo of light that is simpler in design than the poly-lobate of the second. He is surrounded by the thirty-nine figures of Buddha, which are all different from one another and are inserted in red nimbi

that are identical to those found in a number of coeval sites.

On the upper register of the wall, between Dīpaṅkara and Śākyamuni, there is a depiction of a bKa' brgyud pa master who is represented with a rather strong build, dark skin and bent shoulders, and flanked by two disciples.^① The inscriptions which could have identified him have unfortunately been lost and only the incomplete name of the disciple to the left of the main figure of the triad remains, which is not enough to make an historical reconstruction.^②

To the left of Śākyamuni is Tsong kha pa, surrounded by scholars and ascetics amongst which the famous Indian master Nāgārjuna can be recognised, owing to the fact that he is surrounded by snakes. Two monks engaged in a doctrinal debate belong to the same group (Fig. 3).

In the southern section of the South-western wall there is an image of Amitābha depicted in the Land of the Utmost Bliss,^③ Sukhāvātī (Fig. 4), described in the *Sūtra of the great exposition of the Land of the Utmost Bliss*.^④ This short text, which describes a kingdom of wellbeing and prosperity in which there is no kind of suffering, aims to describe how to reach this condition by practicing 'Buddha's mindful memory', a meditation practice which was in vogue at the so-called School of the Pure Land. The main prerogative of this practice consists of attempting to enter into communion with

① The same figure is depicted on the main wall of a stūpa in Nyar ma together with a group of Mahāsiddhas, flanking what remains of the figure of Śākyamuni (cf. Bellini 2010).

② The inscription, which reads *chos rje 'Dzi*, does not make it possible to find information about his identity. The fact that the central master covered a role of a certain importance at the time is clear from the fact that his portrait, executed with characteristic, very specific iconography, is found both in Sa spo la and in the stūpa of Nyar ma quoted in the previous note. In both cases, he is depicted in substantial proportions and has been placed on the main wall of the buildings.

③ As indicated by an inscription: *bde ba can gyi bkod pa bzhug so*.

④ *Sukhāvātyūhasūtra* (cf. Cicuzza 2004: 1180).

Buddha Amitābha, thus developing devotional behaviour (Cicuzza and Sferra 2004: cxxxviii). The painting illustrates the description which is found in the text and shows once again how iconography does not come from the artist's free inspiration but rather is inextricably linked to the texts. Thus, the inhabitants of the Land of Utmost Bliss described in the sūtra are visible around Amitābha: pure beings and Bodhisattvas, flying figures adorned with jewels busy scattering flowers and taking gifts to the Buddha.

A master flanked by two pupils is visible above the Sukhāvati of Amitābha (Fig. 5). A paṇḍita bears the inscription *bla ma (...) s bZang po*, whilst the two pupils are called *bla ma 'Dul ba* and *sTon pa Chos rag (b)la ma*. The western section of the wall is filled with a large image of Avalokiteśvara Ekādaśamukha (Fig. 6), spiritually linked to the family of Amitābha. A standing figure, perhaps a customer, dressed in monastic clothing with his hands joined at the height of his heart is depicted besides his left leg. Two manifestations of the goddess Tārā flank the Bodhisattva: to his right there is White Tārā, who in turn is flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas, and to his left is a Green Tārā.^① The former is surrounded by a halo, the upper part of which is shaped as a poly-lobate arch^② with a central ogive segment, above which a small figure of Amitābha is visible. The second is surrounded by a simpler halo, round in shape, above which

① The iconographic programme of the cave reflects that of the stūpa of Nyar ma. On analysing the pictorial cycle of the cave, it is possible to go back to the missing parts of that painting inside the stūpa. It is conceivable, for example, that, in the past, besides the image of White Tārā, which is painted in the stūpa next to the figure of Avalokiteśvara and is still visible today, there was the image of Green Tārā.

② Arches like this can be seen in the Pāla art of Bihar and Bengal, which conditioned subsequent artistic production of the Newar painters of the Nepal Valley. In this regard, there is a famous thangka depicting the Green Tārā preserved in the Cleveland Museum, surrounded by a poly-lobate arch which is very similar to those depicted in Sa spo la (cf. Pal and Fournier 1988: pl. 18).

Uṣṇīṣavijayā is represented.

Four Bodhisattvas are depicted on the top, corresponding with the last two of the eleven heads of Avalokiteśvara. Amongst them Avalokiteśvara Ṣaḍakṣara and Mañjuśrī riding a lion can be identified. These Bodhisattvas are also surrounded by a double halo, of which the outer one is represented in an architectural form. The base of the arches is held up by columns which are slightly convex at the centre. They are formed of several elements joined with one another and are surmounted by lotus-shaped capitals. This unusual architectural element is also visible in cave No. 3, as well as in the chapel of the protector gods on the rNam rgyal rTse mo in Leh, which belongs to a later period. A similar architectural element is also visible in the paintings of the Great Stūpa of Gyantse.

Above this group there is another triad of historical figures (Fig. 7), which are larger in size than those above Amitābha. As indicated by an inscription, *Bla ma Shes rab bzang po*^① is depicted in the centre. He is flanked on the right by *rje dPal ldan Shes rab* and on the left by *slob dpon (m) Do sde*. There is information about Shes rab bZang po in the *bKa' gdams kyi rnam par thar pa bka' gdams chos 'byung gsal ba'i sgron me* written in 1494 by Kun dga' rGyal mtshan, in *bKa' gdams gsar rnying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan* put together in 1529 by bSod nam Grags pa, and in *Vaidurya ser po* written by the regent of the 5th and 6th Dalai Lamas, Sangs rgyas rGya mtsho, in 1698 (Petech 1977: 176, 178).

The name Shes rab bZang po can be connected to the appearance of the dGe lugs pa order in Ladakh. A native of Mar yul and a disciple of Tsong kha pa, he was an advocate of the success of the

① This master must not be confused with a contemporary namesake, a disciple of Tsong kha pa, who was born in 1394 and died in 1457, and who came from a Tibetan monastery in Kham, Eastern Tibet.

dGe lugs pa order in Ladakh. He is remembered by sources as one of the 'six great speakers of the teachings to the borders' (cf. Vitali 1996: 90), referring to the missionary work of the first dGe lugs pa, and is also called by the epithet *byams sems* (cf. Palden 1997: 28). He founded the hermitage of sTag mo to the north of the village of Khrig se where his nephew *rJe dPal ldan Shes rab grags pa*, depicted with him in cave No. 2, subsequently founded the most important of the dGe lugs pa^① monasteries. A statue representing Shes rab bZang po is visible inside the sTag mo hermitage.

Moreover, *rJe dPal ldan Shes rab*, who corresponds to *rJe drung dPal ldan Shes rab*, a nephew of Shes rab bZang po, became the first dGe lugs pa abbot of the monastery of Phug tal in Zanskar (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 42). In this case too, the master was quoted in *Vaidurya ser po* by Sangs rgyas rGya mtsho, who counted him amongst the practitioners of the *rGyud sTod*, the Upper Tantric College. The master Shes rab bZang po was also a part of the same lineage.

A second disciple represented next to Shes rab, with the name *sLo dpon mDo sde*, may correspond to *sLob dpon mDo sde Rin chen*, to whom the foundation of the dGe lugs pa dKar rgyas monastery in Zanskar is attributed. *dPal ldan Shes rab* was active in Phug tal and dKar sha (Tucci 1971: 485), and *sLob dpon mDo sde Rin chen* is also attributed with some extension work there.

During the 15th century, the dGe lugs pa order experienced a particularly favourable period both in Ladakh and in Zanskar and enjoyed favours from the sovereigns of both the kingdoms. This was especially due to the charismatic personality of Shes rab bZang po, who brought the monasteries of dKar sha and Phug tal, which were

① Petech holds that the monastery is the seat of Kusho Bakula *rin po che*, whereas his private seat was actually the monastery of gSang mkhar, an ancillary of that of dPe thub.

established in the 12th century by the *lo tsa ba 'Phag pa Shes rab*,^① into the dGe lugs pa circle. This was a period of great spiritual liveliness which reached its peak when the dGe lugs pa monks of Ladakh and Zanskar began to go to the Tibetan monasteries of Se ra, 'Bras spungs, and dGa ldan in order to finish their studies.

Another triad of masters is depicted in the corner between the southwestern and northwestern walls of cave No. 2: *Nam kha ga* () *bzang* is in the centre, with *dBang phyug chos rje* to his right and *Sod nam* to his left. The scribe who wrote the rather coarse inscription may have made a mistake in inserting a *ga* instead of a *ba*. If this is the case, then the central figure could coincide with a master called *Nam mkha'i ba* (Petech 1977: 167), which the *bKa' gdams gsar rnying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan* of Sod rmams Grags pa talks about. According to this authoritative source,^② the master dGe lugs pa, was the re-establisher of the dPe thub monastery, although the *Vaidurya ser po* and local tradition (Paldan 1997: 14) attribute its foundation to a younger contemporary called Lha dbang bLo gros.

There is no accurate information available about *Nam mkha'i ba*. However, the name and his association with the circle of the proto dGe lugs pa may lead one to identify him with *Nam mkha' dPal ba* (1373-1447), a *bKa' gdams pa* master and direct disciple of *Tsong kha pa* who resided in dGa' ldan byang rtse and founded a college within the same monastery.^③

The presence of Shes rab bZang po, of dPal ldan Shes rab and,

① 'Phag pa Shes rab was an important translator who was originally from Zanskar and was a peer of *Mi la ras pa* (1040-1123). He went to Gu ge with the aim of becoming a pupil of *Rin chen bZang po*, who died in the meantime (1055). Thus, he became the pupil of an important disciple of *Rin chen bZang po*, the 'young translator' (*Lo chung*) *Legs pa'i Shes rab* (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 38).

② Cf. Petech 1977: 167.

③ Cf. www.tbrc.org.

perhaps, of Nam mkha'i dPal ba in cave No. 2 indicates that the paintings could not have been produced before the beginning of the 15th century. The portraits of these masters also add an important piece to the puzzle in order to understand the developments of the different religious orders in Ladakh, confirming both the open behaviour of the court in guaranteeing protection for all religious orders and the rapid ascent of the dGe lugs school when it was still in its early days of development.

The iconographical programme of the Sa spo la caves, with the figures of Tsong kha pa, Shes rab bZang po, dPal ldan Shes rab and the same cycle of divinities depicted there, corresponds to the doctrinal interests of the dGe lugs pa school. The period in which the caves were decorated was the one in which there was the passage between the years marked by the 'Bri gung pa supremacy and those characterized by greater interest in the dGe lugs pa order (Petech 1977: 170; 1978: 361).

4. Cave No. 3.

Cave No. 3 has an iconographical programme which is partially similar to the one described previously. The main wall is packed on the northwestern side with figures set out neatly in registers according to motifs which seem to recur up to the 15th century. The main image is that of the Buddha Vajrāsana, who is often confused with Akṣobhya because of the scepter of lightning painted on the drape of fabric which covers his throne (Fig. 8). This type of depiction of the Buddha evokes Śākyamuni's defeat of the negative forces represented by Māra in Bodhgayā, a place known by the Tibetans as rDo rje dgan, which is a translation of Vajrāsana, or 'throne of Vajra' (von Schroeder 2008: 142). The style of his garments, the irregular profile of the petals of the lotus flower on which he sits, and the shape of the halo

surrounding him are stylistically similar to those of a Medicine Buddha depicted on a 15th century *thang ka*, perhaps originating from Western Tibet (cf. Heller 1999: pl. 93). On the one hand, the pleating of the richly draped garments refers to motifs of a remotely hellenistic origin; on the other hand, the abundance and refinement of the fabrics reflect a Chinese fashion which was very popular in Tibet. This is confirmed, for example, by the paintings and the sculptures produced in Gyantse between 1420 and 1440 (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: pl. 19). Moreover, gyals are visible in the aforementioned *thang ka*, as indeed in Gyantse (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: pl. 54), and are formed of tendrils and flowers which surround and arrange the figures in the space. The import of these motifs seems to be the fruit of the close relations of the rising dGe lugs pa community in Ladakh with the one which was already consolidated in Western Tibet.

On the northwestern wall there is a painting of a conventional consecration scene under a large portrait of a master (Fig. 9). It depicts a group of figures protected by a canopy, in accordance with a regal portraiture tradition which can be found in several temples in Ladakh up to the 17th century. The customer is realistically depicted in the centre, a lay nobleman in a white garment with long black hair falling over his shoulders, accompanied by his consort and by other figures gathered in prayer (Fig. 10). This may be the sovereign Grags pa 'bum lde who ruled between 1450 and 1490 (Lo Bue 2007: 184) and who, being interested in the dGe lugs pa order, received the disciples of Tsong kha pa in his kingdom and entrusted the restoration of the dPe thub monastery to the order.

A figure of high rank is seated on his left, lower in height than the main figure even though his clothing is of a similar fashion. On his right, there is an elegantly dressed female figure wearing an unusual, conically-shaped headdress, in turn flanked by three female figures

who are smaller in size. Five exponents of the clergy have been depicted next to the laymen, three of which are larger and located in the foreground. They are depicted carrying out consecration rituals, flanked by two standing monks which are smaller in size. Before them, there is a small elegantly decorated table on which the ritual offerings are laid out.

The consecration scene is located under a triad of masters: sTon pa bsam gtan (b) sod nam(s) in the centre, flanked by two disciples, Ye she(s) grags pa^①, and Chos kyi skyabs (Fig. 9). This triad is, in turn, positioned under an image of Atiśa, on either side of which two different emanations of Saṃvara are dancing on the corollas of lotus steles which rise up by his side (Fig. 10). Under the flower on which Atiśa sits there is another aquatic plant with more flowers, which appears to unite the image of Atiśa to that of the underlying master from both the compositional and symbolic points of view. The seven symbols of the Universal Monarch are laid out on some of the flowers: the Dharma wheel, the jewel, the horse, the elephant, the general, the minister and the queen. Although they have connotations linked to temporal power, in truth they have symbolic meanings of a spiritual nature. Each of them symbolizes a decisive factor for achieving awakening: perfect awareness, perfect discrimination of phenomena, perfect commitment, perfect joy, perfect versatility, perfect concentration and perfect equanimity (Beer 2003: 37). Vajrabhairava (Fig. 11), the main protector deity of the dGe lugs pa order, is depicted to the left of Vajrāsana Buddha together with other

① It is interesting to note that the *dge' slong* Ye shes Grags pa painted in Sa spo la has a namesake who lived two centuries after him, who also belonged to the dGe lugs pa order: bLo bzang dGe legs Ye shes Grags pa, founder of the Rang ldom monastery in Zanskar. Snellgrove and Skorupski identify the latter with an abbot who lived during the reign of Tshe dbang rNam rgyal (1753-1782) (1980: 42).

deities such as Saṃvara, Guhyasamāja, and Hevajra, who belong to the same class. This image of Vajrabhairava, who is an important protector, is probably one of the very first depictions in Ladakh.

Two figures are depicted on the southern wall next to Avalokiteśvara and Uṣṇīṣavijayā,^① identified by Snellgrove and Skorupski as 'two bodhisattvas' (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 81). They are precisely Mañjuśrī and Maitreya (Fig. 12), who should be recognizable through their attributes, which are laid out on lotus steles on their side: the sword and the book next to the former and the ewer and three small stūpas, characterized by a face drawn on the respective caps, next to the latter. Moreover, there is an inscription besides the latter which bears the name *byams pa* ('Maitreya').

The two Bodhisattvas are talking while seated with one leg crossed over the other. The scene intends to evoke a vision Atiśa had following the reading of some ancient Buddhist texts, in which the Bengali master saw Mañjuśrī and Maitreya in the sky talking about the doctrine under the watchful eye of Vajrapāṇi,^② who is depicted on the lower side on the same wall. This theme is represented on the walls of the Gra thang monastery (11th cent.) (Vitali 1990: 31), in Southern Tibet and on the main wall of the corridor of circumambulation that surrounds the chapel of the Great Mother (Yum cen mo; 14th cent.) in gSer khang of Zhwa lu (Vitali 1990: pl. 68), Southwestern Tibet; the same subject is also visible on a large *thang ka*, which may come from Zhwa lu, which was produced in the 12th century (Heller 1999: 186).

① The goddess is depicted with a white stūpa behind her, with a face drawn on the cupola. A Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* has been depicted on the top, in correspondence with the cusp.

② The vision is described in the hagiography of Atiśa (cf. Heller 1999).

Under the two Bodhisattvas painted in Sa spo la there is a rare depiction of Vajravīdāraṇa, ① 'Conqueror of Vajra', painted in blue and flanked by birds. Vajravīdāraṇa, a deity particularly revered for his ability to eliminate negativity, is also corresponded by a Mahāyāna sūtra.

On the same wall, as in cave No. 2, the Paradise of Amitābha and the triumphant shape of the Eleven-headed Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 13) is also depicted. The latter is shown here in a curious way, flanked by two standing monks and surrounded by eleven medallions, on which other monks are depicted.

Two manifestations of Vajrapāṇi are visible on the small southwestern wall, one peaceful, and the other fierce. Five small figures of Garuḍa are positioned along the axis of the body of Vajrapāṇi in his wrathful form, which is painted with the colours of the pentad and positioned vertically in correspondence with five of the seven cakras indicated by Indian physiology: white on the top of the head, red on the throat, blue on the heart, yellow above the navel and green in correspondence with the perineum. The colours and positions of each individual Garuḍa correspond exactly to those described in many ritual texts, in which lights and coloured sacred syllables must be displayed in those exact places (Fig. 16) (Fig. 17).

At this stage, the identification of Atiśa (Fig. 14) on the northeastern wall (Wall E) of cave No. 3 made by Snellgrove and Skorupski must be discussed. According to the two scholars, there are two depictions of Atiśa in the same cave: one on the northwestern wall (Wall D) and the other on the northeastern one (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 81). The first image, which has already been

described, is depicted with two lotus steles besides it and two small figures of Saṃvara dancing on corollas, confirming the identification of the Bengali paṇḍita. The second image, on the other hand, appears as follows: the figure, flanked by two main disciples and surrounded by ranks of monks, is depicted in the motion of teaching, and a book and a sword are visible on the two lotus steles painted besides him. These are, of course, the attributes of Tsong kha pa (Fig. 14). The Tibetan master also appears in cave No. 2, identified by Snellgrove and Skorupski (1980: 80) themselves. Identification of the figure as Atiśa, therefore, appears to be incorrect.

There is an image of a standing Maitreya under Tsong kha pa. Three maṇḍalas linked to the cycle of Vairocana are depicted on the eastern section of the wall.

The symbolic complexity of the pictorial cycles of Sa spo la reflects the period of great spiritual fervor which arose from the charisma of Tsong kha pa, who understood how to give new drive to Buddhist religious practice at a time marked by a kind of degeneration of monastic customs. The portraits of the dGe lugs pa masters depicted in the caves attest the origin and rapid ascent of this school in Ladakh, an aspect of Ladakhi history which requires further investigation and reflection.

① As indicated by the underlying inscription: rdo rje mam 'joms zhugs so.

从地中海到喜马拉雅

Captions of Images

1. Śākyamuni. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 1



The Paintings of the Caves of Sa spo la in Ladakh: Proof of the Development of the Religious Order of the dGe-lugs in Indian Tibet During the 15th Century

2. Dīpaṅkara. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 2



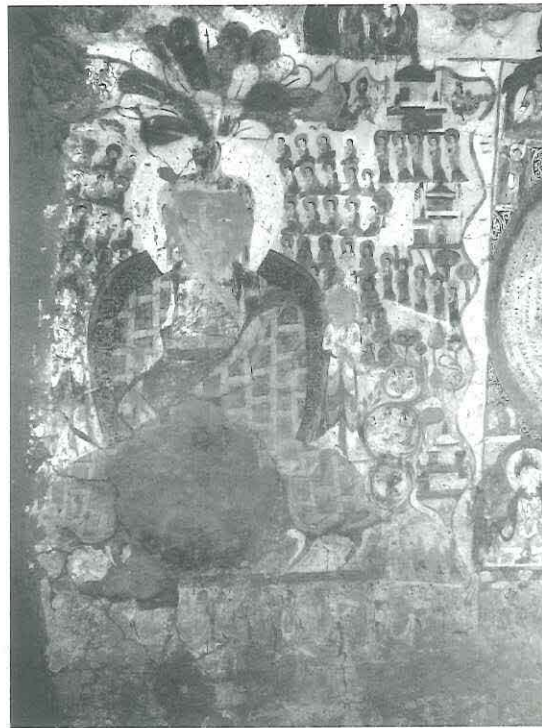
3. Monks engaged in a doctrinal debate. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 3



4. Sukhāvātī of Amitābha. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 4



5. A master flanked by two pupils. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 5



6. Avalokiteśvara Ekādaśamukha. Cave No. 2, Sa spo la.

Fig. 6



7. Shes rab bzang po flanked on the right by dPal ldan Shes rab and on the left by *slob dpon* (m) Do sde.

Fig. 7



8. Śākyamuni Vajrāsana. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 8



The Paintings of the Caves of Sa spo la in Ladakh: Proof of the Development of the Religious Order of the dGe-lugs in Indian Tibet During the 15th Century

9. sTon pa bsam gtan bsod nams, flanked by two disciples, Ye shes Grags pa and Chos kyi skyabs. A consecration scene is located under a triad of masters. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 9



10. The triad of masters with sTon pa bsam gtan bsod nams positioned under an image of Atiśa. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 10



11. Vajrabhairava. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 11



12. Mañjuśrī and Maitreya. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 12



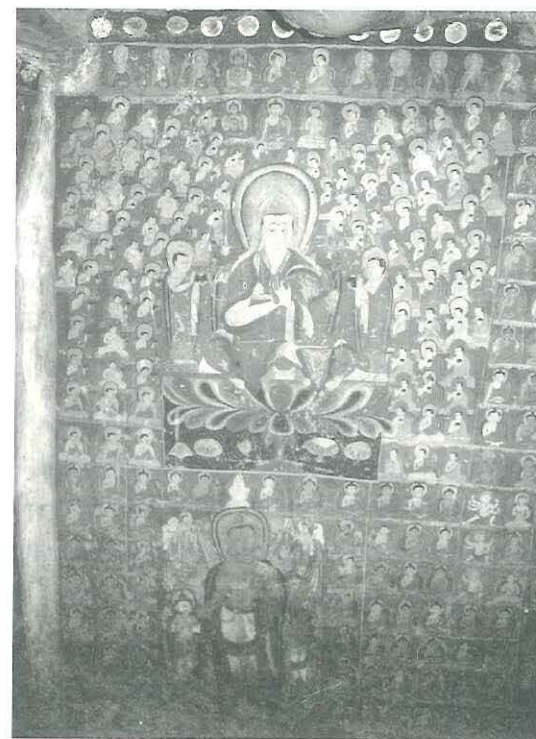
13. Avalokiteśvara Ekādaśamukha. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 13



14. Tsong kha pa. Cave No. 3, Sa spo la.

Fig. 14



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A Religion-Oriented 'Tibet Fever' Tibetan Buddhist Practices Among the Han Chinese in Contemporary PRC

Ester BIANCHI

In the present day PRC^①, it is possible to see Han Chinese devotees offering Tibetan scarves called *hatas*, to their Han Chinese master [Fig. 1], or to encounter monks and lay Buddhists prostrating in front of a stūpa in the traditional Tibetan style, i. e. with their heads, arms and knees bowed down on the ground (a typical Tibetan way for showing devotion) [Fig. 2], as well as others taking part in rituals officiated by a Tibetan lama together with the Tibetan people [Fig. 3]. Similarly, inside Buddhist temples or lay Buddhists' houses one can find statues, images, and religious objects in the Tibetan style placed next to items in the Chinese style [Fig. 4], or to see mantras of Tibetan tantric practices written in Chinese script on walls,

^① This study was conceived within the framework of the research activities of the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités (CNRS-EPHE); a preliminary Italian version has been published in the proceedings of the conference ' Tibet between Myth and Reality ', Florence 14th March 2012 (Bianchi 2014). I wish to express my deep gratitude to Isabelle Charleux, Fabienne Jagou and Maria M. Turek for their careful reading of this paper and for all their helpful comments and valuable suggestions.

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