

Art and Architecture in Ladakh

*Cross-Cultural Transmissions in
the Himalayas and Karakoram*

Edited by

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BRILL

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The mGon khang of dPe thub (Spituk):¹ A Rare Example of 15th Century Tibetan Painting from Ladakh

Chiara Bellini

Historical Background

According to the Chronicles of Ladakh,² dPe thub (Spituk) monastery (Figure 9.1) was founded by 'Od lde, the ruler of Gu ge, in a Rat year in the 11th century, which in all likelihood corresponds to 1048 CE.³ It seems that the monastery subsequently went into decline. All that remains of this first monastery are the two caves known as Brag khung kha ba chen, 'Snowy Caves', which lie near the present monastery in the village on the far bank of the Indus, and the outer shell of the mGon khang.

The contents of the Chronicles are also extremely useful in reconstructing the political history of Ladakh at this time: the founding by 'Od lde of a monastery in the middle of the region, very near Leh, which at the time was an important entrepôt, is a sign of the strong political influence exercised by the kingdom of Gu ge over Ladakh.

The fortunes of the monastery of dPe thub were later restored under the ruler Grags 'bum lde, a builder of temples who was renowned for having contributed greatly to the spiritual renaissance of Ladakh after a period of complex political and religious fluctuations. His reign lasted roughly from 1450 to 1490 (Lo Bue 2007:184), and he therefore probably ordered dPe thub to be rebuilt in the late 15th century. The project was undertaken in commemoration of a visit to the kingdom of Ladakh made by two followers of Tsong kha pa in 1461.⁴

1 My warmest thanks go to my friends in the monastery of dPe thub, who kindly allowed me to photograph the paintings in the temple.

2 *La dvags rgyal rabs*, recorded from the 17th century onwards (Petech 1977:1).

3 As pointed out by Erberto Lo Bue (Lo Bue & Bellini, forthcoming).

4 Sending emissaries in his place must have been normal practice for Tsong kha pa. He is known to have been invited to China in 1408 by the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Chengzu (generally known as Yongle, from the name of his period), but once again declined the offer, sending a pupil in his stead (Snellgrove 1987:181).



FIGURE 9.1 *The Monastery of dPe thub.*

The 15th century in Ladakh was marked by the rise to political power of the dGe lugs pa, due above all to the actions of the charismatic figure of Shes rab bzang po (Figure 9.2), the master who was associated with the very arrival of the order in Ladakh.⁵ A native of Mar yul and follower of Tsong kha pa, he

5 On the top portion of the southwest wall of cave 2 at Sa spo la (Saspol) are depicted three historical figures: a master and two pupils. In the middle is portrayed the *bla ma* Shes rab bzang po, flanked on his right by his grandson and pupil rje dPal ldan shes rab and on his left by *slob dpon* 'Do sde. Information regarding Shes rab bzang po is provided by the *bKa' gdams kyi nam par thar pa bka' gdams chos 'byung gsal ba'i sgron me* written in 1494 by Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, in the *bKa' gdams gsar rnying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan*, penned in 1529 by bSod nams grags pa, and in the *Vaidūrya ser po*, written in 1698 by the regent of the Fifth and Sixth Dalai Lamas, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (Petech 1977:178).

According to the sources mentioned above, he came from Ladakh and became a follower of Tsong kha pa before founding the sTag mo lha khang to the north of Khrig se (Thikse) and the monastery of the same name. He is portrayed in a statue in the hermitage of sTag mo, to which E. Lo Bue kindly drew my attention. He is depicted in a cave as a master accompanied by two pupils. One of these is rje dPal ldan Shes rab, corresponding to rje drung dPal ldan Shes rab, the nephew of Shes rab bzang po, who became the first dGe lugs pa abbot of the monastery of Phug tal in Zanskar (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980:42).

The follower depicted next to Shes rab with the name of *slob dpon* 'Do sde, might be *slob dpon* mDo sde rin chen, who is said to have founded the dGe lugs pa monastery of Chos sde dKar rgyas, in Zangs dkar, and added extensions to Phug tal and dKar sha, where dPal ldan Shes rab was also active (Tucci 1971:485).



FIGURE 9.2 *The master Shes rab bzang po and his disciples, portrayed in cave No.2 at Sa spo la.*

was given the title of *byams sems* (Thubstan Paldan 1997:28). He founded the sTag mo lha khang to the north of the village of Khrig se (Thikse), where his nephew rJe dPal ldan Shes rab grags pa, later founded the monastery of the same name,⁶ as well as some important dGe lugs pa temples in Ladakh and Zanskar. It seems fair to assume that the rebuilding of the monastery of dPe thub was prompted by a process of religious and political transformation triggered by the fame of Shes rab bzang po, exactly as had occurred in the case of some temples in Zanskar (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980:42).

The presence of Shes rab bzang po, dPal ldan Shes rab in cave 2 proves the paintings cannot have been executed before the beginning of the 15th century. The period when the caves were decorated perhaps coincided with a growing interest at court in the dGe lugs pa order (Petech 1977:170; Petech 1978:361). Another important clue is the presence of Vajrabhairava in cave 3. This is possibly the first example in Ladakh of a painted representation of this deity, the subject of particular veneration among the dGe lugs pa. A painting of Vajrabhairava dating from just after the one in Sa spo la can be seen in the small temple inside the *chos 'khor* of Ba sgo, which has been recently restored by a team of Indian experts and the Italian restorer Anna Triberti.

- 6 Petech maintains that the monastery was the seat of Kushok Bakula rin po che. In fact, his private seat was the monastery of gSang mkhar (Sangkar), which was subordinate to dPe thub (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1979:109).

The available sources are rather discordant on this rebuilding of the monastery of dPe thub and its transfer to the dGe lugs pa order. This conflicting information is due to the fact that the sources come from locations which are very far apart and the authors pursue diverging aims. The main sources referring to the putative rebuilding of dPe thub are: the *La dvags rgyal rabs*, chronicles of Ladakh probably first compiled in the 17th century; the *Vaidūrya ser po*, a guide to the dGe lugs pa monasteries and their founders and subsequent abbots, compiled in around 1697 by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (Tucci 1971:475), the regent of the Fifth and Sixth Dalai Lamas;⁷ the *bKa' gdams gsar rnying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan*, a historical text on the development of the Karma pa and dGe lugs pa schools, compiled by bSod nams grags pa in 1529;⁸ and the oral tradition of Ladakh, also confirmed by *The Guide of the Buddhist Monasteries and Royal Castles of Ladakh* by the Ladakhi dGe lugs pa monk Thubstan Paldan (Thub btsan dpal ldan), whom interviewed in 2002 and 2004. Looking at this list, from which emerges quite clearly the geographical and chronological distance between the authors, it becomes possible to envisage the different purposes these texts might have had. Each furnishes the same or similar historical facts seen from a different point of view. This makes it difficult to reconstruct the history both of this monastery and of Ladakh as whole accurately. Examining the sources chronologically, to judge by what bSod nams grags pa writes in the *bKa' gdams gsar rnying*, dPe thub is supposed to have been restored by Nam mkha' ba or Nam mkha' pa (Tucci 1971:485; Petech 1977:167), who is perhaps depicted in the caves of Sa spo la (Figure 9.3).⁹ This figure is likely to have been Nam mkha' dpal ba (1373–1447), a bKa' gdams pa master and direct disciple of Tsong kha pa, who lived in dGa' ldan byang rtse and founded the monastery of dGa' ldan grva tshang. The same source claims he also founded Klu dkyil (Likir), adding that Nam mkha' ba became its abbot

7 The work's full title is *dPal mnyam med ri bo dga' ldan pa'i bstan pa zwa ser cod pan 'chan pa'i ring lus chos thams cad kyi rtsa ba gsal bar byed pa vai dūr ya ser po'i me long*. The section of this text dealing with the founding of the dGe lugs pa temples in Western Tibet was translated by Tucci (1971:472–488).

8 Petech regards this text as particularly authoritative (Petech 1977:174).

9 In the corner between the southwest and northwest walls of cave 2 in Sa spo la are portrayed three masters: in the centre Nam mkha' ga(...) bzang, to his right dBang phyug chos rje and to his left (...) bSod nams. The person who wrote the inscription, rather crudely, might have made a mistake in adding a 'ga' instead of a 'ba'. If this were so, the central figure might be a master called Nam mkha'i ba (Petech 1977:167), who is mentioned in the *bKa' gdams gsar rnying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan* by bSod nams grags pa.



FIGURE 9.3 *The master Nam mkha' ba and his disciples, portrayed in cave No.2 at Sa spo la.*

after the master lHa dbang blo gros, who will be discussed below, although Nam mkha' ba was the elder of the two.¹⁰

However, no other source confirms this information as far as the founding of dPe thub is concerned. The *La dvags rgyal rabs* says only that the monastery was rebuilt at the wish of King Grags 'bum lde after two followers of Tsong kha pa visited the kingdom of Ladakh in 1461, without mentioning any specific name. The text of the *Vaidūrya ser po* is sometimes inaccurate and incomplete in spite of the fame and shrewdness of its author Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, who was perhaps not particularly interested in what had really happened in Ladakh. At all events, in this work it is written that the person responsible for the 'repairs' to dPe thub was the above-mentioned *gSang phu pa* lHa dbang blo gros, who was the direct disciple of mKhas grub rje (1385–1438) (Tucci 1971:484). What is most interesting here is that the oral tradition of Ladakh, and especially that of Thub bstan dPal ldan (Thubstan Paldan 1997:14), corroborates this version, maintaining that dPe thub was refounded by lHa dbang

10 It seems that this information is backed up by an eighteenth-century inscription in Klu dkyil, which was copied by Francke (F.182) (Petech 1977:167).

blo gros,¹¹ supported first by Grags 'bum lde and later by Blo gros mchog ldan (Tucci 1971:485).

lHa dbang blo gros seems a rather interesting figure. He was active in Ladakh and Zanskar in the 15th century and also restored the gSer khang in Tholing (Vitali 1990:38). These details are to be found in an inscription in the lower right-hand corner of the south wall of the dKyil khang in Tabo, where his name appears several times (Petech and Luczanits 1999:6; Vitali 1990:38). The west wall of the same temple in Tabo also has a portrait of him.

The work of lHa dbang blo gros is associated with the endeavours of his older contemporary Ngag dbang grags pa, a direct disciple of Tsong kha pa and abbot of the chief monasteries in Gu ge: Tholing, rTsa hrang blo stang, Dung dkar and Mang nang. In 1424 he held the most important spiritual post in all Gu ge, presiding at the coronation of King Nam mkha'i dbang po phun tshogs lde. He built the new monastery of Tholing, with the help of lHa dbang blo gros (Vitali 1990:38).

After following Tsong kha pa and his novel teachings, Ngag dbang grags pa, a devout missionary from mNga' ris, made his way back to Western Tibet. His intention was to spread the teachings of the Tibetan reformer and found temples and monasteries to provide a firm base for the newly-formed order (Klimburg-Salter 1997:243). Thanks to the energy of this figure, aided by other masters and scholars like lHa dbang blo gros, Tholing became an important outpost of proto-dGe lugs pa in the 15th century. It was from here that monks set off to spread the teachings of their master Tsong kha pa, a process which occurred very quickly. Shes rab bzang po, a direct disciple of Tsong kha pa, had himself already begun this missionary activity in Ladakh.

It is not hard to imagine the reasons why the two followers of Tsong kha pa decided to visit the kingdom (an episode mentioned in the Chronicles of Ladakh), in view of what was happening in Western Tibet during the 15th century—a period of great turmoil for the newly-established dGe lugs pa school. It is reasonable to suppose that one of the two disciples mentioned in the Chronicles might be lHa dbang blo gros, sent to Ladakh by Tholing.

The paintings in the mGon khang probably belong to this stage in the development of the dGe lugs pa in Ladakh and are part of the refurbishing of the monastery complex.

Their distinctiveness lies chiefly in their beauty: these works are exquisite examples of their style (Figure 9.4). Moreover, they are the sole examples of their kind in the whole kingdom of Ladakh. The style of these paintings stands

11 The name Nam mkha' dpal ba appears in the *Vaidūrya ser po ma*, where he is described as the second abbot in dPe thub (Tucci 1971:484).



FIGURE 9.4 *Deity belonging to the cycle of 'Direction Deities', painted on the east wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

out immediately when compared with that of contemporary temples and monasteries, such as those in the lHa khang so ma, in A lci, those in the Sa spo la caves, those in the Gu ru lha khang, in Phyi dbang (Phyang), in the *chos khor* of Tsha tsha Phu ri, in A lci, those in a *mchod rten* in Nyar ma¹² and those which are all distinguished by their coarser and less sophisticated style. Taking as a specific example the cycle of paintings in the Sa spo la caves, datable to around the late 15th century, the differences between the two styles are glaring and cannot be explained away as the result of gradual changes occurring over a decade or two. In all probability, groups of artists arrived in the area from the most important dGe lugs pa centres in Tibet, with the founding of the first dGe lugs pa monasteries in Ladakh.

It is very likely that the founding of dGe lugs pa monasteries in Ladakh attracted groups of artists from more important dGe lugs pa centres in Tibet. The paintings in the mGon khang in dPe thub might thus have been executed by artists from Western Tibet. On close examination, certain paintings in the

12 To this list should be added the bCu gcig zhal, in Wanla, the Seng ge lha khang, in Lamayuru, and the *lha khang* in A lci Shang rong.



FIGURE 9.5 Pictorial cycle painted on the north wall of the *mGon khang* of *Khrig se*.

Gu ge area, for instance those in the Vajrabhairava lHa khang, in the lHa khang dkar po and in the lHa khang dmar po in rTsa brang (cf. Tucci 1989), display similarities in style and iconography with the paintings in the *mGon khang* in dPe thub. This style in turn seems to betray the influence of models found in the sKu 'bum in Gyantse, where mKhas grub rje was involved in the iconographic layout.¹³ This is the master lHa dbang blo gros followed and it is highly probable that he travelled to Gyantse, where he would undoubtedly have viewed the paintings within the various buildings. Jamspal maintains that the very reason for building the Te'u ser po stupa in Leh was to erect a structure in imitation of the stupa in Gyantse (Jamspal 1997:142).

Another example of this unusual style can be seen in the *mGon khang* in Khrig se, where a number of wonderful figures (Figure 9.5) can be made out in spite of the pervasive darkness and the layers of oily black soot deposited by centuries of burning candles. The temple belongs to the dGe lugs pa order and probably dates from the monastery's foundation by Shes rab bzang po's nephew, rJe dPal ldan Shes rab, portrayed together with his uncle in cave 2 in Sa spo la. In all likelihood, Shes rab bzang po also played a part in the foundation, which probably dates from the early 15th century, since it is known that in

13 mKhas grub rje helped Rab brtan Kun bzang found the dPal 'khor chos sde in Gyantse (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993:25).

1447 certain beams in Nyar ma were used in the construction of the 'Du khang dKar po in Khrig se.

The paintings in the mGon khang in dPe thub also display certain similarities with paintings executed inside the sTon pa lha khang in Phug tal, in Zanskar (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980:52), whose first abbot was precisely dPal ldan Shes rab (Tucci 1971:485). The monastery of Phug tal is part of a group of monasteries won over to the dGe lugs pa order by the efforts and charisma of Shes rab bzang po. The resemblances among the paintings in these three sites (dPe thub, Khrig se and Phug tal) reveal the existence of a school of painting, very probably of Tibetan origin and associated with the dGe lugs pa order.

The Cycle of Paintings

Access to the rectangular temple is by a side entrance set into the south wall. On the west wall there are nine statues of Protectors of the Dharma, including Mahākāla, mGon dkar, the 'White Protector', the lCam sring group, 'Brother and Sister', Khyi tra, riding a dog, and dPal ldan lha mo on a mule. From these emerges the figure of Vajrabhairava, the largest of the statues present, which constitutes its *parivāra*. Two other statues, dPal ldan lha mo riding a mule and an attendant, are set in the corner between the west and north walls, opposite the entrance wall. The statues are framed by large halos of flames painted red and decorated with fine spirals painted in shades of the same colour, creating a chiaroscuro effect. The outlines of the halos have a serrated 'bird's crest' appearance, originally an Indo-Newar stylistic feature found in several other temples in Ladakh.¹⁴ The leaping flames reach up to the ceiling, covering the wall behind the statues completely and lending a powerful atmosphere to the temple as a whole.

The iconographic cycle is dedicated to Vajrabhairava, rDo rje 'jigs byed, a deity worshipped with particular fervour by the dGe lugs pa. He is the god of death and the netherworld, as well as 'Lord of the Law' (Chos kyi rgyal po), the supreme judge who decides the fate of the deceased. He owes the devotion he attracts, especially among ordinary people, to his role as judge and executioner (Tucci 1989:77).

14 Halos of flames depicted in a similar fashion are present in the paintings in the Gyantse stupa (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993:166, Figure 51).

Vajrabhairava is the terrifying emanation of Mañjuśrī,¹⁵ constituting the fusion of his benevolent and wrathful aspects (*zhi khro*). He symbolizes the ability to overcome and destroy all forces pitted against the Dharma and its practice and the power to eliminate anything standing in the way of a person achieving ultimate salvation. This characteristic in particular is embodied by Yamāntaka,¹⁶ an emanation of Vajrabhairava;¹⁷ the very name of this deity is the symbolic expression of the concept expressed above: he is the ‘Remover of the Obstacle Yama’, namely death (Māra, tib. bDud). Yamāntaka is regarded as a god of redemption. The iconographic programme echoes the cycle painted in the Vajrabhairava lha khang of rTsa brang.

The North Wall

There are five registers of paintings on the north wall, covering a variety of different images (Figure 9.6). The paintings cover three-quarters of the surface area of the wall, leaving a broad band completely image-free along the bottom. In the upper register are depicted seven masters in monk’s habits, who are part of the tantric cycle concerning the mandala of Mahāvajrabhairava.

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- 15 In his triumphal manifestation, Vajrabhairava is represented with 34 arms, 16 legs and nine heads. The face above the other two central ones is the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī’s.
- 16 Vajrabhairava’ is often mistaken for Yamāntaka, especially by the Tibetans themselves. Yamāntaka is in fact a manifestation of Vajrabhairava and has his own characteristics. He has a different iconography and does not have an animal aspect, but a human face instead. He is the symbolic representation of the perfect union between pairs which achieve the quintessence of tantric asceticism: ‘father and mother’, ‘meaning and mystic gnosis’, ‘sun and moon’, ‘*idā* and *pīṅgalā*’ (Tucci 1989:84).
- 17 A considerable tantric literature has developed on the subject of Vajrabhairava and can be broken down into three groups of Tantras, each distinct but closely correlated with the others. On the one hand there is the group devoted to Vajrabhairava, namely the *Śrīvajramahābhairavatantra* and the *Śrīvajrabhairavakalpatantrarāja*; on the other there is the series of Tantras dedicated to Yamāri: *Kṛṣṇayamārisarvatathāgatakāyavākcittakṛṣṇayamārināmatantra*, *Kṛṣṇayamārikarmasarvasiddhikaraṇanāmatantra* and *dPal gShin rje gshed nag po’i rgyud rtog pa gsum pa* (Tucci 1989:78–79). All these ‘revelations’—the Tantras being esoteric revelations of the Buddha, according to Mahāyāna beliefs—are closely associated with one another.

The first master to spread the teachings regarding Vajrabhairava was Lalitavajra, who lived in around the tenth century; according to tradition, he brought the Mahāvajrabhairava from Uḍḍiyāna to Tibet, although philological analysis has shown that these texts were of Nepalese origin.



FIGURE 9.6 *The North wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

They embody the continuity of the initiatory teachings begun by Vajrabhairava himself.

There are 16 masters of the lineage depicted here: some visible on the north wall—one seems to have been destroyed—and others on the south, diametrically opposite. According to tradition they should correspond to Vajrabhairava, Ye shes mkha' 'gro ma, Lalitavajra, Amoghavajra, Jñānakaragupta, Padmavajra, Dīpaṅkararakṣita, rDo rje grags pa (the *lo tsa ba* of Rva), Chos rab of Rva, Ye shes seng ge of Rva, 'Bum seng ge of Rva, Rong pa Shes rab seng ge, bLa ma Ye shes dPal, Chos rje Don grub rin chen, Tsong kha pa and mKhas grub (Tucci 1989:111). Special care has been taken to convey the expressions on their faces, as if the artist was intent on portraying their individual features. Mutilated parts of the human body (legs, arms, heads, etc.) stand out against the dark background behind them. This gruesome sight, which includes predators, such as big cats and vultures, reproduces a typical cremation or so-called 'sky funeral' site, an iconographic subject typical of this Indo-Tibetan cultural context. The figures are heavily outlined in black and it is worth mentioning here that this is a feature found in other cycles of paintings in Ladakhi temples. It is

already to be seen in the temple of Mang rgyu, for example, and is still present in the 16th century mGon khang in the rNam rgyal rtse mo in Leh.¹⁸

Above the figures of the masters, human and animal skins are arranged in the form of a sort of long canopy, a decorative element often present in subjects of this kind.

The register beneath contains six *dharmapāla* with multiple arms, once again part of the cycle associated with the mandala of Vajrabhairava.

The third and fourth registers are devoted to an iconographic group revolving around the figure of Yama,¹⁹ Lord of Death and the Netherworld. He is also known as 'Lord of the Dharma', *dharmarāja* in Sanskrit.²⁰

Yama takes several different forms, each with its own epithet, but the most common are *phyi sgrub*, *nang sgrub*, or *phyi nang gsang sgrub*. Like many tantric deities, this *dharmapāla* also has 'outer', 'inner' and 'secret' forms. The dPe thub version is the 'inner' Yama, *Nang sgrub Srin gi gdong can*, with the human, wrathful, face of a *rākṣaṇa*. His attributes are a flaying knife and a skullcap. This variant of Yama is often portrayed together with four other emanations of the same divinity, namely *Zhi ba'i gShin rje*, *rGyas pa'i gShin rje*, *dBang gi gShin rje* and *Drag gi gShin rje* (De Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996:83).

As mentioned above, between the third and fourth registers there is a series of five Yamarāja, comprising Yama, the chief figure, in his 'inner' aspect with a human face, and four images of Yama with a bull's head. A smaller figure portraying Yamī, Yama's sister, is added to this group of five Yamarāja (Figure 9.7).

The first figure in the Yamarāja cycle, running from west to east in the third register, represents gShin rje ser po (Pīta Yamarāja, 'Yellow Yama'). Next to him is depicted gShin rje dmar po (Rakta Yamarāja, 'Red Yama'), followed by gShin rje dkar po (Sita Yamarāja, 'White Yama'), whose attributes are a double-headed hourglass drum and an arrow, and gShin rje sngon po (Nīla Yamarāja, 'Blue Yama'), who holds a spear and a lasso. All are depicted with an erect penis, a feature typical of the emanations of Vajrabhairava, Yamāntaka and Yama, symbolizing the mystic bliss achieved through the alchemical union of bodily fluids, according to traditional Indian physiology. This supreme bliss is experienced the instant these fluids in the two channels either side of the spinal column (*iḍā* and *piṅgalā*) unite in the middle channel (*susumṇā*).

18 My thanks go to Christian Luczanits for his remarks regarding this stylistic feature.

19 The correlation between Vajrabhairava and Yama is depicted graphically in the *maṇḍala* of Vajrabhairava, which faces south, where Yama's kingdom reliably lies.

20 At times he is also known by the epithet gShin rje chos kyi rgyal po.



FIGURE 9.7 *Yamī painted on the north wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

The four animal-faced aspects of Yama preside over the four points of the compass and are considered tutelary deities of the four chief magical actions associated with the tantric liturgy (Tucci 1989:85).

The fourth register is partially occupied by the red halo of the two statues on this side of the temple, dPal ldan lha mo and one of her attendants. Cemeteries and cremation sites, with mutilated bodies being eaten by vultures, are painted over the remaining area.

The next figure on the wall is the terrifying image of Yamī (Figure 9.7), with a human face and a martial stance, holding a *kapāla* in her left hand and a flaying knife in her right. Her long red hair, framed by a diadem made of human skulls, is done up in a bun, with just a few flickering, flame-like locks loose. The goddess's body is adorned by various types of jewels: earrings, anklets, garlands and a long necklace of freshly hacked-off human heads reaching down to her ankles. In spite of her aggressive appearance and bulging muscles, she still retains a certain femininity, highlighted by her slim waist and full, round breasts. A long piece of cloth billows on Yamī's shoulders as if tossed by an imaginary wind swirling about her body. Her wrathful expression is made all the fiercer by the third eye placed vertically between her flaming

eyebrows and by her fleshy red lips drawn back to reveal her sharp teeth set in a snarl (Figure 9.7).

Next to Yamī is painted the most important image on the wall, the large figure of Yama gShin rje Nang grub (Antarasādhana Yamarāja), coloured blue and with red hair and wrathful expression. He wields the same attributes as his sister and assumes the same stance. His face is more carefully detailed, making this image if anything even fiercer and more terrifying than the previous one.

Nag sgrub is the tutelary deity of Tsong kha pa and might therefore have been depicted in the mGon khang of dPe thub to reinforce the commemorative purpose of the rebuilding of the temple.

gShin rje Nang grub dances over a remarkably well-observed corpse, in which the expression of agony is very skilfully conveyed (Figure 9.8). The detailing in this figure in general is of a notably high standard. For instance, the hair has been painted strand by strand with an extremely fine brush. Figures with a human and animal aspect, with long hair and fierce expressions, are depicted horizontally under the corpse. A similar group is visible also at rTsa brang where the figures are identified by captions written under them. These are Yama's acolytes going about their funerary operations with their spears, staffs and other weapons of the period. A red, bull-faced figure wields a trident, while a black crow with outspread wings carries a female figure (Figure 9.9), which is found also at rTsa brang, where the inscription identifies it as 'Bebs ma (Tucci 1989:93). Another female figure, with the face of an animal and long dark hair, dances next to another with a beard and moustache bristling with flames, hair standing and a fierce expression (Figure 9.10). An ash-covered demon holds a big white sack in his hand, while the figure by his side plays with a ball of thread. These weird and grotesque creatures are swathed in plumes of smoke and surrounded by swollen rivers of blood flowing among them (Figure 9.11). The pleasure the artist derived in painting these particular scenes is palpable.

The East Wall

The east wall is divided up into registers in the same way as the previous, with the upper register containing a row of *thang kas*.

The *yi dam* cycle beneath is considerably blackened and damaged, making it hard to achieve an accurate iconographical reading, and is interspersed with images of Herukas. Each Heruka is surrounded by a halo of red flames, similar



FIGURE 9.8 An “enemy of the Doctrine” painted on the north wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.



FIGURE 9.9 Acolytes of Yama. North wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.



FIGURE 9.10 *Acolytes of Yama. North wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*



FIGURE 9.11 *Acolytes of Yama. North wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*



FIGURE 9.12 *Vajradhāra. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

in style to those behind the statues, creating a harmonious continuity between painting and sculpture.²¹

The black background to the figures is decorated with human skeletons depicted with quick strokes of white paint.

The third register shows four finely drawn peaceful figures. The first is Vajradhara (Figure 9.12), who holds two *vajras* across his chest in simulation of an embrace with his tantric consort. The second is a particularly elegant figure seated with one knee raised (Figure 9.13). Her sinuous body is showed

21 This interplay can also be seen in the gSum brtsegs in A lci or in the Ta bo monastery, where painting and sculpture are perfectly matched, and indeed blend seamlessly into one another (as in the paintings on the *dhotīs* of the statues in the gSum brtsegs in A lci and those on the statues in the Śākyamuni and Maitreya chapels in Mang rgyu).



FIGURE 9.13 Deity. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.

up by her loose red trousers, which leave her belly uncovered, displaying her slim waist. Her delicately-featured face is seen in profile and her long hair is partly arranged loosely on her shoulders and partly done up in a small bun on the nape of her neck. This figure is followed by Nāro Ḍākinī (Figure 9.14), depicted with a wrathful expression and in her typical iconographic pose, as if performing a dance step. In her left hand she holds a *kapāla* full of the blood and fat of enemies of the doctrine, which she raises towards her lips. In her right she holds the ritual knife used for the symbolic flaying of the enemies of the doctrine, while a *khaṭvāṅga*,²² a trident with three heads at different stages of decomposition impaled on the end, rests in the crook of her arm.

This image is notable for its sexually explicit details, including muscular legs, with full thighs and fine ankles, large round breasts, a huge sexual organ—symbolizing fertility—and supple hips.

The fourth figure is equally beautiful, being in the same pose and performing the same gestures as the second. The draughtsmanship in these images is especially admirable. The fine line seems deliberately to highlight the litheness

22 These particularly macabre objects and symbolic instruments originated in Indian origin and are associated with the worship of Śiva.



FIGURE 9.14 *Nāro Ḍākinī*. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.

of these gorgeous female deities and to convey the eroticism of their rounded bellies and the sensuality of their gestures.

The accurately drawn light and dark Herukas which follow the peaceful figures might correspond to Kroddharāja sMe brtsegs, a special form of Jambhala (Tucci 1989:104–105). This protector exists in both white and green versions and is normally invoked during purification rites performed with consecrated water. These rituals generally act as exorcisms and are carried out in order to obtain relief from illness or infection or to counteract the harmful influence of demons (*gnod*) (Tucci 1989:106). On the other hand, the two protectors could be the two versions of the six-armed Mahākāla: Nātha Mahākāla and Sita Mahākāla. The sixteenth figure in this register does indeed portray Nātha Mahākāla, whose face is shown in three-quarter profile, with three heads and six arms and red hair held in place by a diadem of human skulls. The short beard of flames rendered along the jaw line with small orange curls immediately catches the eye.

On this same row can also be seen a representation of dPal ldan lha mo, Rematī, astride a mule (Figure 9.15). She is depicted in her secret manifestation,



FIGURE 9.15 *dPal ldan lha mo. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

whose symbolic meaning is only accessible through the profoundest meditation. *dPal ldan lha mo* is the Buddhist version of *Kālī*, the 'Great Mother', the wrathful aspect of Śiva's consort, symbolizing the ceaseless cycle of life and death. According to Indian demonology, *Rematī* was originally an ogress haunting the lives of children. In the earliest and most renowned Indian treatise on

paediatrics, the *Kumāratantra*, her influence became active on the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of a child's life, and gave rise to bouts of high fever. When she began to exercise her power, the child would begin to display clear signs of illness: a general weakness of the body and a loss of hair, appetite and voice. Then, after the ogress was converted and incorporated in the Buddhist pantheon, she adopted these features as part of her iconography (Tucci 1989:97). All these details of unequivocal Indian origin are clearly to be seen in the Rematī painted in the mGon khang in dPe thub. The artist has obviously attempted to depict the extremely emaciated body as realistically as possible, dwelling on the muscle sinews and protruding bones. The deity's dark skin—traditionally painted blue—is covered with the ash of cremated human bodies. The wrathful face includes a third, horizontal eye between the flaming eyebrows. The red hair is framed by a diadem of human skeletons, from which a few curls rendered with the tip of a fine brush break free and hang down over her broad forehead. Rematī traditionally wears a *dhoṭī* made from a tiger skin, while in this case she is actually wearing a short skirt decorated with a pattern of interlaced stripes and a snake belt. The mule she is riding is depicting at a walk and the realism of the representation reveals the eye of the naturalist in the artist and his knowledge of anatomy, a skill frequently repeated in the depiction of birds, dogs and other animals.

The fourth register contains sixteen images of exceptional beauty, two of which are covered by a cupboard, painted within elegant, trefoil-arched niches with a red background. These figures belong to the cycle of 'Direction Deities', which includes the deities in the Hindu pantheon.

The image of Brahmā (Tib. Tshangs pa) (Figure 9.16) opening the cycle shows him with three heads and four arms seated on a splendid, finely-detailed peacock. The middle face is peaceful and benevolent, with long eyebrows and finely outlined almond-shaped eyes. The small, even lips are poised in a slight smile. The other two faces are exact opposites of one another: one is explicitly feminine the one, while the other is plainly male. His bottom right hand draws a small noose to his chest, while the other points to the sky; the bottom left hand holds a rosary, while the other seems to be tendering a lotus flower out of the frame. Indeed, the originality of the composition lies precisely in the way the fingers of this hand extend beyond the edge of the niche holding this image of Brahmā.

The next deity, Vemacitrin, (Tib. Thags bzang ris), is partially covered. The face is damaged, although its beautiful oval shape and slightly parted red lips can still be admired, and the detailing in general has almost disappeared. The hair is drawn back in a bun on the nape of the neck, leaving the broad forehead free except for a few delightful locks that have broken loose, framing the face.



FIGURE 9.16 *Brahmā. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

Thags bzang ris sits on a throne supported by two large wheels, from one of which, bizarrely, protrudes a horse's tail.

The third figure, Sita Candra, is portrayed with her eyes half-closed and turned downwards in ecstatic meditation. Her beautiful red lips are parted in a delicate smile. The deity mimes the gesture of stretching a thread across her



FIGURE 9.17 *The “enemy of the Doctrine”. Detail of painting on the east wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

chest, holding a long-stemmed lotus flower in her right hand. She is seated cross-legged on a lotus bloom and wears loose, emerald-green trousers draped around her in heavy pleats.

The fourth figure, Nirṛti, is the first of only two wrathful figures in this cycle. He holds a flaying knife and a *kapāla* in his hands.²³ His bright red hair is done up in a bun adorned with a diadem of human skeletons. He is shown riding an enemy of the doctrine, although he actually looks as though he is dancing over him (Figure 9.17). The expressiveness of the face and precise draughtsmanship make this secondary figure perhaps one of the most beautiful in the entire cycle of paintings. Nirṛti appears to step out of the frame, with one foot alighting on the script in *lan tsa* characters running along the edge of the wall.

Śiva as Īśāna (Tib. gNod sbyin dbang ldan), the fifth figure, is depicted embracing Pārvaṭī (Figure 9.18), who is considerably smaller and painted blue. In his right hand he wields a trident and in his left, held low, he holds a *kapāla*, while encircling his consort’s waist with his arm. The pair are sitting astride a red bull.

23 Given the attributes, the figure depicted might be Yama, sometimes also present in this cycle (Chandra 1999:173).



FIGURE 9.18 *Śiva and Pārvatī. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

The sixth figure to be represented is Pṛthivī Devī, (Tib. Sa'i lha mo). The central portion of this painting is badly damaged and it is impossible to make out any attributes or the gestures of the hands.

The seventh figure, with a wrathful expression and red hair unusually gathered up at the top of the head, wields a sword while riding a white bull. He wears a short red *dhoṭī* and a crown of human skulls.

The face of Indra (Tib. brGya byin), the eighth figure, is damaged. He is riding an elephant, whose rather strange appearance suggests that although the



FIGURE 9.19 *Sita Varuṇa. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

artist had a good knowledge of animal anatomy, he had never actually seen an elephant, inevitably leading to the deduction that he was not of Indian origin.

The ninth image depicts the four-armed Viṣṇu, shown riding Garuḍa and holding his sceptre in one of his middle hands.

Viṣṇu is followed by Sita Varuṇa (Tib. *Chu la dkar po*), Lord of the Nāgas (Figure 9.19). This exceptionally beautiful figure holds a sort of snake lasso in his hand, while riding a sea serpent. The dynamic intensity of the whole composition is remarkable: the legs gripping the flanks of the sea serpent are

turned to the left, the arms move to the right, while the god turns his sultry gaze again to the left. Indeed, the handling of the face is especially exquisite. The eyes are sharply defined, the evenly curved lips slightly parted in the merest smile, and the perfectly straight nose ends in small, graceful nostrils. The result conveys an aesthetic sensibility completely new and unique in Ladakh.

The cycle also includes a representation of Sita Gaṇapati (Tib. Thsogs dbag dkar po), a manifestation of Gaṇeśa converted to Buddhism.

Although the twelfth figure is not immediately recognizable owing to the severe damage to its face, it is clear from the red skin, hand gestures and the fact that his mount is a yak that this is a representation of Agni (Tib. Me lha).

The thirteenth figure is Vāyu, (Tib. Rlung lha), who is depicted holding a long lasso in her hands. He wears blue trousers with red edging and a white belt. She is depicted riding a goat, whose head is turned towards her as he turns her gaze upwards, in a sort of ecstatic rapture (Figure 9.20).

Sūrya, the 'Sun', the fourteenth figure, is seriously damaged. His right hand is turned towards his lap and holds a lotus, while the left hand is in the gesture of *abhaya mudrā*, warding off danger. The figure is seated on six horses' heads, arranged in an original way to symbolize his chariot.

This group of deities has been painted with particular care compared with other similar iconographic cycles, such as the one found in the mGon khang of Phyi dbang or in the temple of Maitreya in Ba sgo. The figures are depicted in a variety of poses and performing different gestures and include the features, such as facial expressions, clothing and hairstyles, that make each unique. There is a clear attempt at providing an individual 'portrait' of the deity represented. Even the halos that surround them are of different colours.

The South Wall

The south wall, in which the entrance is set, is undoubtedly the one most seriously damaged: the plaster is in a terrible condition and the paintings are severely blackened by the smoke from oil lamps. Two sections of the wall have been rebuilt and plastered and are thus undecorated. This means the iconographic programme is incomplete, although there are enough details remaining to be able to reconstruct the full cycle with some confidence.

In the western portion of the upper register can be seen mirror images of masters wearing monks' habits found on the opposite north wall, completing the cycle of the *Mahāvajrabhairavatantra* lineage. The unusual appearance of these figures' faces makes them extremely interesting: some have slightly pop eyes and wrathful expressions.



FIGURE 9.20 *Vāyu. East wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.*

In the register below are represented four figures on horseback divided into pairs, one beneath the other (Figure 9.21). Temples, both in Ladakh and in Tibet, frequently contain images of horsemen in which the symbolic significance can vary from one to the other.

Each of these four figures is depicted with his own individual features and clothing, and thus enjoys a distinct identity. They all carry arms, whether spears or bows and arrows, and are dressed in what are probably the fashionable Tibetan clothing and headwear of the period. The knots in their



FIGURE 9.21 The “Eight Masters on Horseback”. South wall of the mGon khang of dPe thub.

horses’ tails symbolize royalty and are quite common features in this type of image.

There seems to be an equal number of horsemen, albeit considerably damaged, on the opposite side of the same wall. The full set constitutes the *parivāra* of Vaiśravaṇa, known as rTa dbag bryad, the ‘Eight Masters on Horseback’ (De Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996:69).

An enormous Tibetan lion facing its rider adorns the entrance door. Vaiśravaṇa, so damaged as to render him virtually unrecognizable, is the figure directly above. The only clues to his identity are the three features that can still be made out: Tibetan boots, the treatment of the weave of the clothing making it resemble the chain mail of a suit of armour, and a kind of pennant rippling in the wind like a victory standard. It is common to find one of the Four Guardian Kings, particularly Vaiśravaṇa, at the entrance to a temple. He protects the north and guards the treasures. Vaiśravaṇa, rNam thos sras or simply rNam sras in Tibetan, is also known as Kubera or Jambhala (De Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996:68).

To Vaiśravaṇa’s right there are a number of badly damaged protectors with multiple arms. The register below is also lost—a peaceful, smiling face being all that remains.