

A Note on Tholing Monastery

In summer 1993, a research team from the Institute of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies of the University of Vienna, working in cooperation with the Lhasa Academy of Social Science, made an expedition to Tholing monastery in the west of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China. Our purpose was to identify the unpublished photographs taken during the expeditions made by Giuseppe Tucci in 1933 (Tucci, *Cronaca della Missione Scientifica Tucci nel Tibet Occidentale* (1933), Rome, 1934) and 1935 (Tucci, *Santi e Briganti nel Tibet Ignoto*, Milan, 1937), to place them in their architectural contexts through a study of the monastery and to complete the documentation of the oldest monuments. About 125 photographs of Tholing in the Tucci Archive in Rome were never published by Tucci and were not identified by him. Although their preliminary architectural attribution within the monastery and their sequence had come to light through the cataloguing work of Deborah Klimburg-Salter

(Klimburg-Salter, O. Nalesini and G. Talamo, *Abbreviated Inventory of the Tucci Himalayan Photographic Archive 1928-35 – Synopsis of the Complete Catalogue kept in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale Photographic Archives*, Rome, 1994), the exact location of each of the photographs within the various temples of the monastery (the plans published by Tucci appearing rather preliminary) was not known. Thus, it was necessary to document the temples in Tholing (Fig. 1).

Of the nine or so temples within the former sacred enclosure (*chökhör*), only two are preserved today: the Main temple (Tsuglagkhang) and the White temple (Lhakhang karmo). Additionally, the remaining fragments in the lowest room of the three-storeyed Serkhang temple have now been restored. These three temples have all been documented by J. Poncar of Cologne, who accompanied us as photographer. Besides these monuments of approximately the 15th/16th century, most of the other temples of this once large monastery are preserved only in ruins. These temples are said to have been successively destroyed from 1966 to 1973 during the Cultural Revolution, when 60 truck-loads of bronzes and metal decoration were removed from Tholing monastery alone. In fact everything of value, including wood, which is scarce in the region, appears to have been taken away during this period, and the sculptures destroyed: only the remaining mud walls were left largely unharmed. However, the murals painted on them have since been gradually washed away by rain.

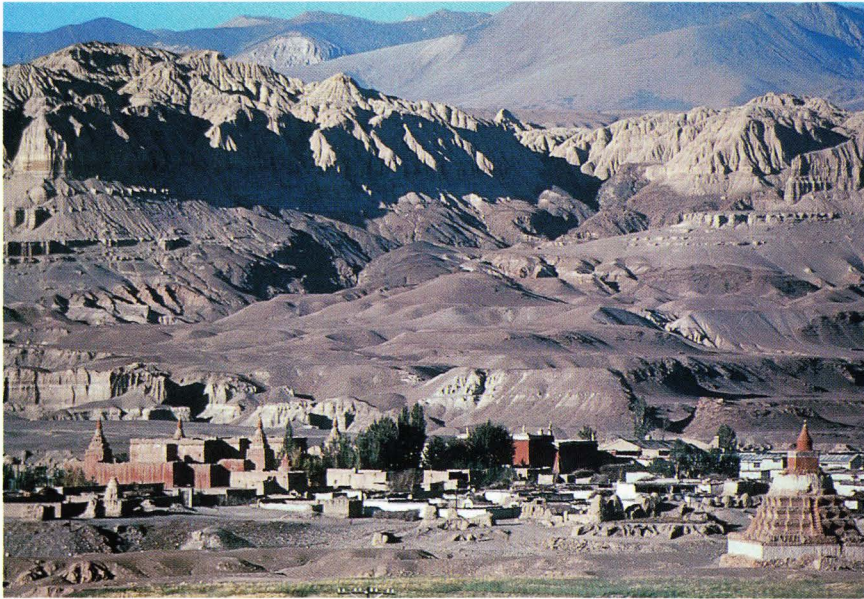
The most important of the ruins is the Temple of Yeshe Ö (959-1036), today called Gyatsa. Although destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, even today the original and unique architectonic concept and regularity of the temple impress the visitor (Fig. 2). At first glance, nothing seems to have been preserved. Everything moveable was removed: the roofs were taken off and the sculptures have gone, except for the remains of their *mandorlas* and the holes where they were fixed to the wall. Many rooms are filled with debris, and excrement and rubbish is everywhere in evidence; the walls appear without any trace of the paintings seen by Tucci in 1933 and 1935. This impression,

however, is deceptive. It is not true in fact that the decoration seen by Tucci no longer exists: a careful look reveals that where the debris is relatively high, painting is preserved below the present ground level. That this fact has been discovered by others as well can be seen by signs of digging along the walls in various rooms, thereby exposing some of the paintings. Also, the main throne in the centre of the temple

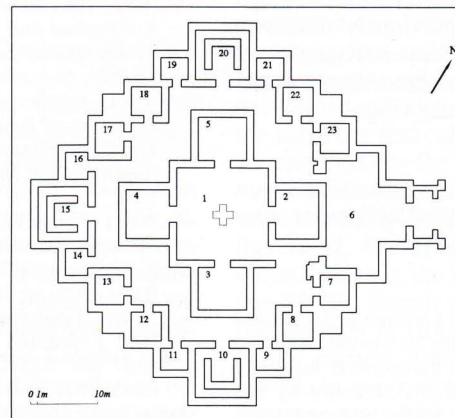
has been partly uncovered. Moreover, at least in one case, sections of the murals have been cut out of the wall. One example, an important chapel to the rear of the temple, should be mentioned in particular. The west wall of this chapel was photographed during Tucci's visit (Fig. 3). The murals in the southwest corner were later exposed and some details cut out, presumably the faces of two *bodhisattva* images. As the murals were left exposed, these are now lost (Fig. 4). Tucci's photograph indicates that the painting dated from the 12th or 13th century.

However, the temple does still contain paintings that are even older. In many parts of

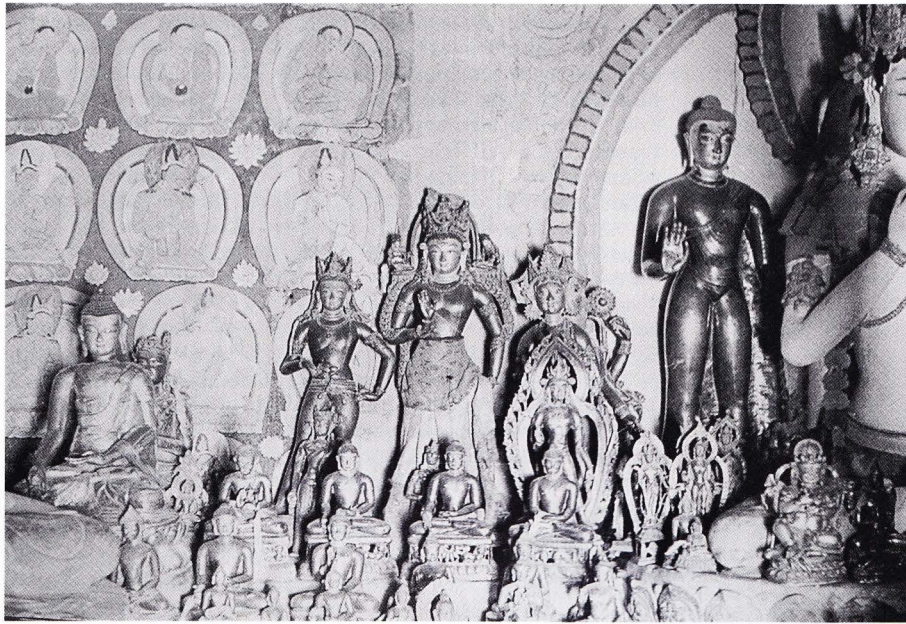
the temple it can be seen that behind the 12th/13th century sculptural fragments, an older layer of painting still exists. As can be seen on the fragment of a painted *bodhisattva* in Figure 5, which seemed to have been freshly exposed in the year of our visit, this layer belongs to the original building phase and would thus be dateable to the late 10th century. In other cases, however, the older painting seems to be merely decorative, but the few small fragments uncovered at places where sculptures once stood do not give us any reliable clues concerning their subject. However, considering these finds, we can expect that throughout the extensive temple, an older layer of painting is preserved underneath a cover of clay. Whether these murals are mainly decorative or in fact representational, they are certainly the largest group of paintings preserved in the TAR belonging to the original decoration of a temple. Dating to the end of the 10th century, they are probably also the oldest murals extant. Besides the Gyatsa, another nearby ruin also shows traces of 10th century painting below a layer



(Fig. 1) The ruins of Tholing monastery
Tibet Autonomous Region
Photography by C. Luczanits



(Fig. 2) Plan of the Temple of Yeshe Ö
Tholing monastery,
Tibet Autonomous
Region
By C. Luczanits



(Fig. 3) West wall of chapel 13, Temple of Yeshe Ö, 1933 Tholing monastery, Tibet Autonomous Region (After Ulrich von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes*, Hong Kong, p. 103; photography by Gherzi, Tucci Archive, Neg.Dep.L. 6077/5)

(Fig. 5) Face of a *bodhisattva* Maitreya chapel (chapel 15), Temple of Yeshe Ö, Tholing monastery, Tibet Autonomous Region Late 10th century Photography by D. Klimburg-Salter



(Fig. 4) Southwest corner of chapel 13, Temple of Yeshe Ö, 1993 Tholing monastery, Tibet Autonomous Region Photography by D. Klimburg-Salter



of clay.

Many of the visitors undertaking the burden of the long trip to Tholing and Tsaparang (Chabrang) have read Tucci's travel accounts or some of his *Indo-Tibetica* (Rome, 1932-41, 4 vols), and are well aware of the treasures he discovered there. A fragment with traces of paint or *tsa-tsa* (Buddhist votive offerings) are common souvenirs. Some of the visitors are also able to recognize a fragment's age, and to judge its market value in Europe, the USA or Japan. It is very likely one of these who cut out the 12th or 13th century murals of the Temple of Yeshe Ö.

The local authorities do not care for the ruins. They have cleaned the spaces between them, but the ruins themselves are left to deteriorate. Some of the people living in Tholing even use them as toilets. This carelessness is certainly sufficient excuse for visitors to take whatever they like, as it would apparently only disintegrate if left in place. In this way the process of destruction is even accelerated. Thus, we strongly appeal that this unique site be protected and preserved. As a first step, the remaining walls must be protected against rain. Then, the rubbish and debris should be removed. This second step should be performed by qualified archaeologists, as the debris often contains parts of the sculptures, and the murals preserved below the present level of debris are certainly very fragile. The long-term goal

should be the recovery of the oldest paintings in as far as they are preserved. This work, however, would seem to be highly problematic, due to the layer of clay pasted directly onto the underlying layer of painting, which is very thin and easily damaged. The desired results can therefore only be achieved by very careful and time-consuming work, which must be done by specialists. In our view, removal of these paintings would be impossible, as the surfaces covered are very large.

The culmination of these efforts would result, not merely in another attraction encouraging tourists to take a long and exhausting journey to Western Tibet, but in a hitherto unknown and exceptional monument of the late 10th century, which could serve as a rich source for the investigation of early West Tibetan culture at the beginning of the Second Propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.

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