
Traversing the Land of *siddhas* and *ḍākinīs*

Art Historical Evidence along the Buddhist Pilgrimage Routes through Lahul

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As I make my slow pilgrimage
through the world, a certain sense
of beautiful mystery seems to
gather and grow.

A.C. Benson

Introduction

When Giuseppe Tucci published his essay on “Travels of Tibetan Pilgrims in the Swat Valley”, he was especially interested to show that, in contrast to Śāmbhala, there are some reliable pilgrimage travelogues that give a

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kind of itinerary of the Swat valley, where the mystical Uḍḍiyāna¹ must have been located (Tucci 1971: 370–371). Tucci claimed that although both Śāmbhala and Uḍḍiyāna were transformed into a fairyland where geographical and historical reality fade and decay, Uḍḍiyāna at least can be located in a terrestrial geography. Tucci (1971: 370) stresses that Uḍḍiyāna, considered to be the land of Padmasāmbhava and the place of *ḍākinīs*, became the holy land especially for the rNying ma pa and the bKa' rgyud pa.

The Buddhist pilgrims set off mainly from Tibet or Ladakh to the Swat valley, and on their journey from the eastern areas to Uḍḍiyāna they travelled through the Himalayan valleys of Ku nu (Kinnaur), Kulu, Kangra and Lahul. According to the oral tradition, the pilgrims not only passed Lahul² on their trans-regional journey, but also stayed there and sanctified the landscape through their meditational power, leaving body-prints and performing miracles. Since pilgrimage in or through Lahul is not restricted to the Buddhist religion but is also conducted by Hindus, the district became a sacred area where the stories of Hindu gods and Buddhist saints, *siddhas* and *ḍākinīs*, play a pivotal role in the mystical history of the country.

This article focuses on the travelogues of three famous Buddhist pilgrims from the 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud pa, namely those of rGod tshang pa and his disciple O rgyan pa, both from the 13th century, and sTag tshang

ticle. I also want to express my thanks to Nawang Jinpa from the Garsha Young Drukpa Association (YDA), who kindly shared some “insider” views and local perceptions and corrected some misleading “western” opinions with regard to the sacred landscape in Lahul. In 2011 a publication on the Buddhist sacred landscape of Lahul was released by the YDA (Garsha Young Drukpa Association 2011).

¹The geographical location of Uḍḍiyāna, O rgyan (O rgyen) or U rgyan, as one finds the name in Tibetan texts, is still under discussion. Recent research tends to attribute Uḍḍiyāna to an area much broader than just the Swat valley, covering the west of modern Pakistan (see also the article by Anna Filigenzi in this volume, CHAPTER 5).

²Lahul is a subdivision of the district of Lahaul-Spiti, the largest but most sparsely settled district of Himachal Pradesh. The administrative headquarters of this district are in Kyelang, on the northern bank of the Bhaga river. The Tibetans and inhabitants of the region prefer the name Gar zha (Hutchinson and Vogel 1933: 476), also written Garzha or Garsha (Sahni 1994: 21), or dKar źva (Klimburg-Salter 1994: 46). Lahul consists mainly of three valleys named after the rivers that run through the region. The Bhaga valley is divided into the regions Tod or Punan (upper part) and Gar (lower part), while the Chandra valley is also named Tinan. After the confluence of the two rivers the valley is named Chandrabhaga or Chenab valley, or Pattan.

ras pa, from the 17th century. These travelogues describe their travels to the twenty-four *pīṭhas* of the *vajrakāya* through the Himalayan region and their route to Uḍḍiyāna.³ In order to trace their paths, particularly through the valleys of Lahul, these three pilgrimage routes will be discussed mainly from an art historical point of view, that is, by associating the place names listed in the itineraries with sites and monuments of the region. It will become evident that some sites in Lahul played an important role already in past centuries, while others are, astonishingly, not even mentioned. A critical aspect of this study is therefore to understand the definition of sacred space and the creation by Tibetans of major pilgrimage destinations and places in and through North India, as Toni Huber (2008) has explicitly investigated recently. Why did Lahul become a place of interest for 'Brug pa monks? What attracted them to this area so that they were eager to risk their life and health on the exhausting and dangerous path through the narrow valleys and over the high passes? The close analysis of the three travel routes will show what the three pilgrims encountered when they were wandering through the valleys, which empowered places they searched for, and which places they empowered by their presence and activity.

The Itineraries of Buddhist Pilgrims

The sacred biographies of Buddhist *yogins* and *siddhas* are without any doubt significant sources for gaining information about the spiritual lives of the adepts. These *rnam thars* often combine a certain amount of historical reality with mystical tales of the saints' miraculous deeds. They mainly reflect religious ideas and function as paragons for the adherent, who is to be introduced to the spiritual legacy, rather than as an authentic transmission of the "real" *vita*. Nevertheless, these early hagiographies (from the 11th and 12th century onwards) are often the only records that provide details of travel routes and the concept of Tibetan pilgrimage in India at that time. Tucci noticed that the certain identification of places was difficult because, on the one hand, the spelling of the place names mentioned in the itineraries does not follow any phonetic rules or common etymology,

³The chronology of the pilgrims' travels is not fully clear, but the following life-dates are proposed for the three pilgrims: rGod tshang pa (1189–1258 CE), O rgyan pa (1229–1309 CE), and sTag tshang ras pa (1574–1651).

and because, on the other hand, we can not be sure that the information in the travelogues was copied correctly by monks over the centuries (Tucci 1971: 383). Toni Huber points out that “many *namthar* might yield for us not more than lists of Indian places and sites whose names we could be sure the Tibetan authors or compilers of texts knew, plus a few details of interest to set the scenes of their narratives” (Huber 2008: 64). In other words, narrations of pilgrimage in and through India do not derive from first hand experience, and there is no indication that the subject of the biography, the *yogin* or *siddha*, ever actually was *en route*. Huber (2008: 92) illustrates that the pilgrimage to a *pīṭha* does not imply travel to a physical geographic place, but that it can also occur as just a mental meditative exercise. In most cases, it is both an internal and external journey.⁴

However, the three travelogues under consideration contain more information than just simple lists of place names. The itinerary of rGod tshang pa gives a quite vivid description of the strenuous and dangerous journey through the Himalayan range, such as traversing a high pass from Lahul to Chamba with the help of local people (Tucci 1971: 378–379). It is stated that the climb took about twelve days, which corresponds well to modern trekking tours from Lahul to the neighbouring district via the Kugti or the Asha Galli pass. The travel account of sTag tshang ras pa is even more detailed and frequently measures the distances between the single stops in days. Even if we can not be sure about the speed of the pilgrims and how many miles they managed to walk in one day and in which direction, we can consider the high altitude, the severity of the paths and the accessible passages over the mountains, and so gain a rough idea of how far away one point might be from the other.

The routes that the three ’Brug pa adepts took via Lahul differ quite noticeably from each other and they are often so clearly and logically described that—even if the information about the pilgrimage journey was passed down by oral tradition—the compiler of the biography and the travelogue obviously must have been familiar with the topographical setting of Lahul.

⁴Huber (2008: 87) refers to the Yoginītantras that consider the *pīṭha* both as the abode (*gnas*) of a *ḍākinī* or a *yoginī*, and equally as a physical location and an internal point (*cakra* or *nāḍī*) that the pilgrim can visit for meditation and ritual practices. A good introduction to the concept of external and internal journey to the *pīṭha* of the Cakrasaṃvaratantra is given by Templeman (1999: 187–189).



Figure 7.1 Mountain Dril bu ri with Guru Ghantal monastery (view from the Chandrabhaga valley). Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV.

The following chapters will map the paths of the three pilgrims through the valleys of Lahul and attempt to compare the place names in the *rnam thars* with contemporary art historical evidence.

The Journey of rGod tshang pa

rGod tshang pa is often erroneously considered to have been from Lahul. According to Tucci, rGod tshang pa's pilgrimage from Zhang zhung to Uḍḍiyāna must have taken place in the first quarter of the 13th century (Tucci 1971: 375).⁵ Tucci discovered rGod tshang pa's itinerary, which he considered to be "rather detailed and fairly old," during his journey

⁵This date is contradictory to Tucci's opinion that rGod tshang pa was born in 1213 (Tucci 1971: 375). Francke refers to the chronological account of Lahul and maintains that rGod tshang pa lived during the 12th and perhaps the beginning of the 13th century. Vogel gives a much earlier date and attributes the lifetime of the Tibetan lama to the 11th century (Hutchinson and Vogel 1933: 478). Tobdan (1984: 20), however, gives the dates of rGod tshang pa from 1189 to 1258 based on the *rGyal ba rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar bzhugs*. The later date has been generally accepted (Huber 2008: 101).

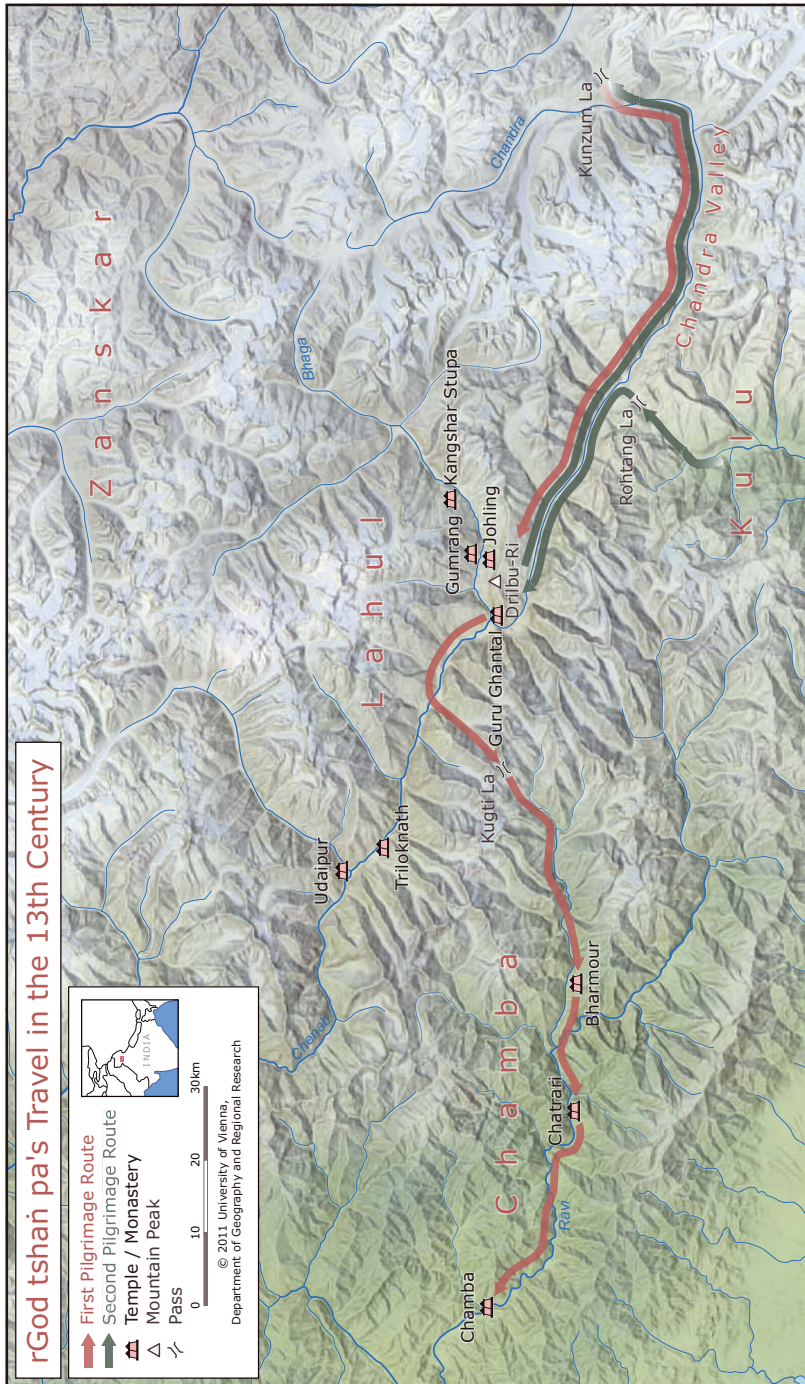


Figure 7.2 Map of Lahul in the 13th century

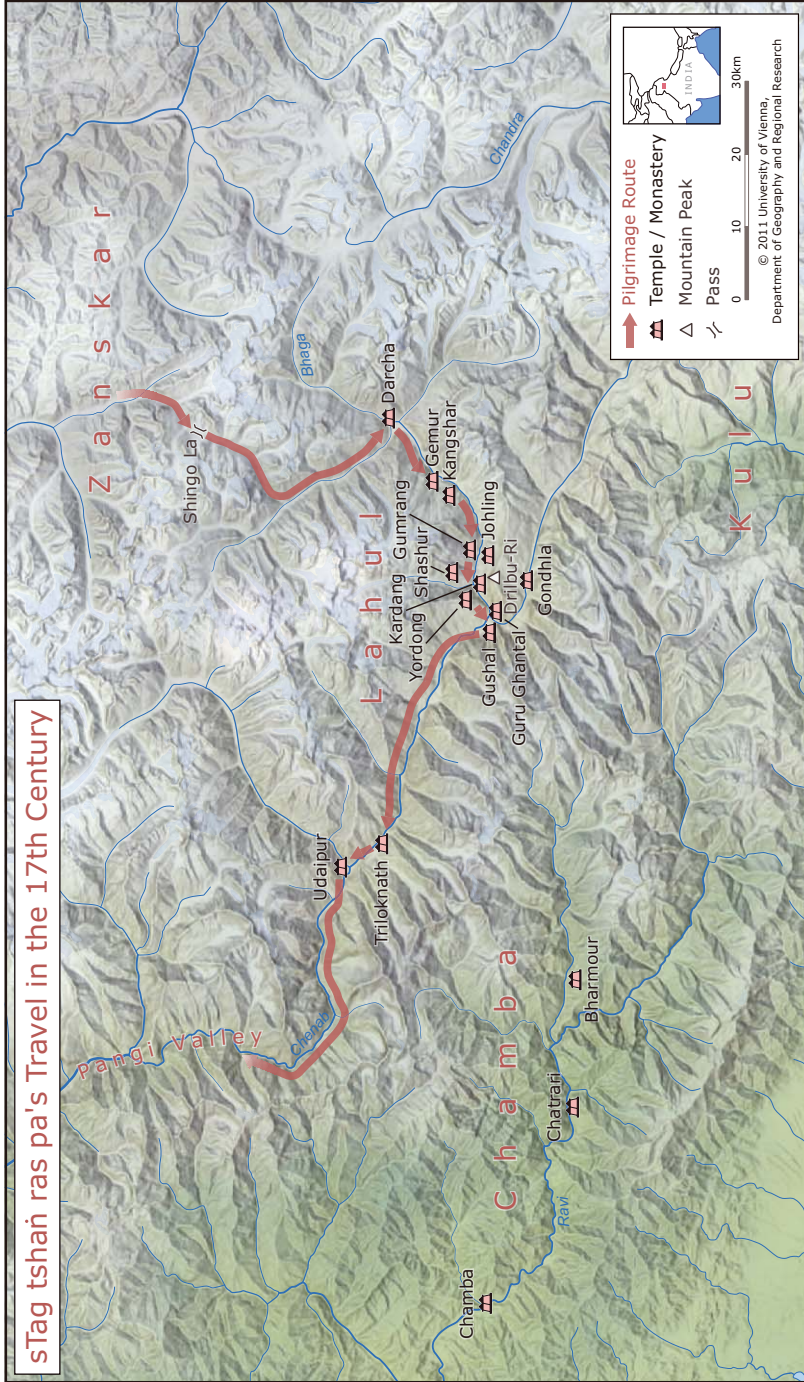


Figure 7.3 Map of Lahul in the 17th century

through Spiti in 1933 and he translated all passages relevant to geography and history (Tucci 1971: 375–382).⁶

The biography reports that after having crossed the whole country of Zhang zhung, rGod tshang pa went from Spiti to “Gar śa where there is the mountain Gandhala” (Tucci 1971: 377; see FIGURE 7.2). Tucci proposes that rGod tshang pa took the route through the Chandra valley, as this was the common way in former times (and even nowadays). Tucci identifies the mountain Gandhala as the sacred peak of Dril bu ri, but he claims that the name might actually refer to the small monastery Gandhola on the slopes of the mountain (Tucci 1971: 378; see FIGURE 7.1). This monastery, today called Guru Ghantal, is believed to be a foundation of Padmasambhava and the oldest Buddhist shrine in the region. A famous marble head, today kept in the Tupchiling monastery just below Guru Ghantal, is believed to originate from the time of Nāgārjuna and to have been blessed by Padmasambhava. The small monastery high above the confluence of the rivers Chandra and Bhaga was erected on a simple, single-square ground plan with massive stone walls interspersed with wood to guarantee better stability in this earthquake area.⁷ The original structure of the shrine was enlarged by some additional rooms including a small anteroom, storerooms and a kitchen. When Romi Khosla visited the site in the early 1970s, a slate pagoda roof covered the core of the temple. A flat roof ran around this structure and covered the outer parts (Khosla 1979: pls. 153–154).⁸ Today, the building has a simple sloping tin roof,

⁶The biography is named *rGyal brgod tshan pa'i rnam thar gnas bsuds pa'i sgron me* and is a separate chapter of the *dKar rgyud rnam ky'i rnam thar gyi sgron me* (Tucci 1971: 374). This manuscript is listed by Tobdan (1984) as number twelve of fourteen different *rnam thars* for rGod tshang pa.

⁷According to Romi Khosla (1979: 118), the construction forms generally preferred in Lahul are random rubble walls. They consist of stone masonry alternated with continuous courses of timber to strengthen the structure. This tradition is widely known in the neighboring areas of Kulu, Chamba, and Kangra. Khosla observed that—at the time he published his book—the courses of wooden beams were left out of the construction due to a shortage of timber in Lahul; straight masonry walls were bonded together with mud mortar instead (Khosla 1979: 118–119). Today the traditional construction techniques are being neglected more and more. Due to tourism and in the name of modernity and progress, new materials and construction forms are being used, e.g., modern hotel complexes that meet the expectations of foreigners and visitors. Local inhabitants, however, still prefer the traditional houses, as they suit the climatic conditions best.

⁸Khosla refers to H. Whistler, who, when traveling through Lahul, saw Guru Ghantal with “a timber sloping roof of the type found on the wooden temples in Chamba and Hidimba Temple at Manali” (Khosla 1979: 92).



Figure 7.4 Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala, Guru Ghantal. Photo: V. Widorn 2004, WHAV.

which is becoming more and more popular in the architectural landscape of Lahul.

The colourful interior of the two-storey monument contains beautiful textile and wall paintings, depicting figurative representations of a Cakrasaṃvara *maṇḍala* (FIGURE 7.4). The lantern ceiling with several square and triangular shaped sectors is decorated with geometrical forms, *yantras* probably also representing the Cakrasaṃvara cosmos. The high quality carvings of the wooden pillars, railings, and the entrance door are also remarkable. A couple of simple, roughly carved wooden sculptures depicting, among others, Buddhas, lamas, and also two of the five *tathāgatas*, Vairocana and Amitābha, kept now in the Tupchiling monastery just below Guru Ghantal, probably originated from the temple above. A recently repainted wooden sculpture of Prajñāpāramitā, with a clumsy body, a broad face, and stylized attributes such as a book and a lotus might be attributed to a local workshop (FIGURE 7.5).⁹

Due to heavy modification and restoration measures inside and outside the building, it is difficult to date the oldest elements of this Buddhist

⁹The clearly female figure is erroneously identified as an Avalokiteśvara.



Figure 7.5 Prajñāpāramitā, probably from Guru Ghantal, now kept in Tuptchiling monastery. Photo: V. Widorn 2004, WHAV.

monastery. There are no indications, or at least no remains, of a 12th or 13th century structure, not to speak of an 8th century monastery from the time of Padmasaṃbhava. According to local tradition, the place of Gandhola or Guru Ghantal was an important Buddhist site from the 2nd century CE onwards. The so-called “Kulu vase”, a bronze vessel now kept in the British Museum, was discovered by a certain Major Hay in Kundhla¹⁰ in 1857 and is dated to the Kushan period.¹¹ O.C. Handa states that the vase “was found in a monastic cell, which was exposed by a landslide” and that therefore “the relict may be considered as a definite evidence of the existence of a *guha*-type Buddhist monastery of Gandhola [...]” (Handa 2004: 79). He further identifies the engravings running around the vase, which show a procession of mainly female figures, chariots, elephants and horses as a scene from a Buddhist *jātaka*, but without giving any explanation. Aside from the unclear place of discovery, does this object really document such an early establishment of Buddhism in Lahul, and can it furthermore confirm the existence of a Buddhist monastery at this site before and during the time of rGod tshang pa? Can it not be seen rather as an indication for the early emergence of travel, trade and pilgrimage in this region? The vase might have come to Lahul at any time between its production and discovery.

Thus, when the itinerary mentions the mountain Gandhola as part of rGod tshang pa’s pilgrimage route in Lahul, it need not necessarily be identical with the Guru Ghantal monastery (or a predecessor building) as Tucci supposes. In fact, the text states that (Tucci 1971: 378):

[...] there was a kind of small monastery in a village high up; since he did not want to stop there, he went to the *lotsāva* of mGar and informed him about his plan of going as far as Dsva lan dha ra (Jalandhara), but the *lotsāva* replied that he could not reach the place and that he would scarcely survive [...].

It is not clear if the translator stayed at the small monastery mentioned in the itinerary or at other sanctuaries in the lower Bhaga valley (Gar) that already existed at the time of rGod tshang pa. Two small

¹⁰Kundhla most probably does not refer to Gandhola or Guru Ghantal at the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga, but to Gondhla, the former Tinan in the Chandra valley famous for the high Thakur tower.

¹¹The object is now kept in the British Museum, London, and is published in the museum’s database (last visited 24-03-2013): <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection> (Registration number: 1880.22). See also Handa 2001: fig. 14.



Figure 7.6 Collapsed temple of Johling. Photo: V. Widorn 1998.

Buddhist temples, Johling and Gumrang, situated near Kyelong, are attributed by the local tradition to the time of Rin chen bzang po or a little later.¹² The two single-celled shrines with thick masonry were decorated with high-quality sculptures and must have been important Buddhist establishments that were still being worshipped in the 13th century. Now both temples are in a bad condition (FIGURE 7.6); the last two wooden sculptures of Johling were removed long ago from the small dilapidated hamlet and brought, respectively, to the British Museum in London and the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba (Widorn 2008: 52–53). The clay sculptures from Gumrang, previously attached to the main wall in a *maṇḍala*-like composition, are now just placed side by side against the wall. Thick plaster has destroyed the wall paintings, a few traces of which can still be seen next to the entrance door.¹³ The wooden ceiling still contains traces of ornamental and floral paintings. The frame around the narrow entrance

¹²While Johling (Zho ling) can be associated with one of the twenty-one minor foundations mentioned in the biography of Rin chen bzang po (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 95), Gumrang is ascribed by Luczanits (1994: 83–89) to a later period, mainly due to stylistic features of the clay sculptures that indicate a date around the 12th century.

¹³Two photographs from the estate of Henry Lee Shuttleworth, now in the British Library in London, show the former position of the clay sculptures, obviously in tact at least till the 1920s, when the scholar travelled through Lahul. A four-headed Vairocana, placed



Figure 7.7 Wooden entrance door of the Gumrang Temple—river goddess and donor figure. Photo: V. Widorn 2002, WHAV.

door is carved with one row of an elaborated, fanciful creeper-motive and a second row of lotus-blossoms. A badly affected Gaṇeśa is set above the door. A river goddess with lotus and vase is placed opposite a probably male figure with his hands clasped before his chest—maybe the donor of the sanctuary (FIGURE 7.7). Neither of the two temples is mentioned in rGod tshang pa’s biography and it is highly unlikely that he visited these places.

His travelogue continues to report that, after having spent three days in this region, rGod tshang pa and his companion proceeded to Chamba, where they were awaited by the local king Bi tsi kra ma.¹⁴ To reach Chamba they had to cross a high pass “full of snow reflecting like a mirror [...] so high that it seemed to rise to heaven” (Tucci 1971: 378). The two pilgrims could only manage the steep climb over the pass with the

in the center, was framed by two bodhisattvas on either side and canopied by fanciful *makaras*. Left and right, on each side, two *tathāgatas* (in the upper row) and two female goddesses (in the lower row) completed the composition that was furthermore framed by depictions of gods and goddesses painted all over the main wall. For a detailed description of the clay sculptures and fragments, see Luczanits 2004: 107–112.

¹⁴Tucci could not find any correspondence to a king’s name in the *Vaṃśāvalī* of Chamba except that of Vicitravarman, who lived in the 11th century (Tucci 1971: 379).



Figure 7.8 The Manimahesh range with Shashur monastery in the front.
Photo: V. Widorn 2002, WHAV

help of some Mon pa (identified by Tucci as tribes of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands) who carried their loads (Tucci 1971: 379). It is most likely that rGod tshang pa crossed the Kugti pass, situated just opposite Dril bu ri and around 4,800m high (FIGURE 7.8). The pass leads from Lahul to Brahmaur and is still regularly used by local shepherds (and tourists on trekking tours). It belongs to the Manimahesh range, of which the highest peak is the sacred Manimahesh Kailash, regarded as the mystic abode of Śiva. K.P. Sharma is enthusiastic about the setting and fancies how “when through the mist the morning sun rises above the Śikhareśvara linga on the summit of the Kailāsh, it shines like a mani (jewel)” (Sharma 2001: 91). A Tibetan rock inscription which was found near Brahmaur and dated by Jean Ph. Vogel (1911: 20) to the 11th or 12th century indicates that the way from Lahul along the Manimahesh range to Brahmaur and further on to Chamba might have been a path commonly used by Tibetan pilgrims.

It seems that on his way to Uḍḍiyāna, rGod tshang pa neither traversed the Chandrabhaga valley, nor visited any religious monuments in this area except for the sacred site at the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga. On his way back from Jalandhara the Tibetan monk entered Lahul for a second time, now from Kulu. Tucci (1971: 382) translates:

Then he went to Gar śa; then to the retreat in Ga ndha la. He spent there the summer; and his inclinations to the practice of the good greatly increased. Then in autumn he reached the pass of rTsan śod in Spiti.

Again there is no exact description of the place where the pilgrim spent the summer months. The oral tradition has it that rGod tshang pa's favourite meditation site was a small cave on the steep slope of Dril bu ri and it is absolutely conceivable that for his retreat he used one of the remote caves of the mountain massif far above the villages.

Another of his biographies, which is cited by Detlef Lauf (1971: 370), supposedly mentions that rGod tshang pa spent more than one summer in Lahul.¹⁵ Lauf also states that rGod tshang pa visited the sites of Ku lu ta and Maru. The former abbot of Kardang monastery, Kun dga' rin po che (d. 1967),¹⁶ who was, at least by the local people, highly honored as the incarnation of rGod tshang pa, reported that Ku lu ta was a pyramidal mountain east of Kulu, and Maru, or Mar ru tse, a high, steep rock cliff north-west of Triloknath, which might be identical with modern Udaipur in the Chandrabhaga valley. Lauf (1971: 367) points out that Maru is of great importance for tantric practitioners, as the meditation cave of the *dākinī* Vajravārāhī is believed to be there.

It seems as if Kun dga' rin po che knew of many more stories and legends about the 'Brug pa monk with regard to Lahul and also with regard to his teachings and tantric practices.¹⁷ rGod tshang pa is also considered the founder of several monasteries in the lower Bhaga valley. One village is named after him, Gozzangwa, and is located between Kardang monastery and Guru Ghantal on the southern bank of the Bhaga. The Yor dzong or Yoldong monastery (FIGURE 7.9), just on the opposite side of the river, was erected over his summer cave. While travelling through the air from one side of the river to the other, rGod tshang pa left his knee imprints,

¹⁵Lauf (1971: 370) actually refers to two other Tibetan manuscripts containing the biography and itinerary of rGod tshang pa, namely the *rGyal ba rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo reji nram par thar pa mthong ba don ldan nor bu'i phreng ba* and the *Chos rje rin po che rgod tshang pa'i nram par thar pa*.

¹⁶The reputation of Kun dga' rin po che is not undisputed. Scholarly literature draws an image of the lama which is, however, quite different from that accepted by the local people, who highly respected him (Stutchbury 1991: 83–85).

¹⁷His most important doctrines have come down to us in the *Ro snyoms phyag rgya chen po* (Lauf 1971: 371).



Figure 7.9 Yoldong monastery, Bhaga valley. Photo: V. Widorn 2002, WHAV.



Figure 7.10 Rock carvings of a group of three bodhisattvas in Kardang village. Photo: V. Widorn 2002

that are now preserved in the small village temple of the Kardang just opposite of a rock with the carving of three nearly life-size standing bodhisattvas (FIGURE 7.10).¹⁸ It is impossible to say from an art historical point of view if these two monasteries date from the 13th century because—even more drastically than Guru Ghantal—most of the Buddhist monasteries in Lahul have been completely restored and renewed in the last decades. The monastery of Kardang, a little above the village, has equally undergone this kind of rebuilding just recently. The new construction is decorated with bright wall paintings (e.g., of a Cakrasaṃvara *maṇḍala*) and furnished with new sculptures. The monastery is supposed to have been established in the 11th or 12th century, but it was obviously in such bad shape that a fundamental renovation was carried out at the beginning of

¹⁸ Lauf (1971: 365) believes that there are approximately thirty known rock engravings in Lahul, but most of them have been destroyed or are now buried under the earth. He considers rock engravings located along the old pilgrimage route to be the first traces of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Lahul. He dates the depiction of a group of three figures carved on a rock at Gondhla (or Tinan) to the 5th century and a similar engraving in Kyelang to the 7th or 8th century (Lauf 1971: 135). The Kardang group seems to be of later origin, probably dating back to the 9th or 10th century.

the 20th century under Lama Norbu (Sahni 1994: 260). The monastery, which to this day contains a collection of “old” thangkas and manuscripts, is not mentioned in rGod tshang pa’s biography, however.

Using a third biography which states that the lama left Tibet at the age of twenty-five and was *en route* for four years, Lauf (1971: 370) dates the pilgrimage of rGod tshang pa from Tibet to Jalandhara and Uḍḍiyāna to between 1204 and 1208 CE. It may be uncertain whether rGod tshang pa spent more than one summer in Lahul, but he definitely played a pivotal role in the religious history of Lahul.

The Journey of O rgyan pa rin chen dpal

A disciple of rGod tshang pa who followed his tracks and also travelled in this region was O rgyan pa rin chen dpal. Tucci (1971: 372) reports that O rgyan pa became an adept under rGod tshang pa at the age of seven. But O rgyan pa discovered his karmic connection with O rgyan (viz., Uḍḍiyāna) and went on a pilgrimage to the land of mystery.¹⁹ Tucci discovered the itinerary of O rgyan pa (who he dated to 1230–1293 CE)²⁰ in his biography, which was found among the large collection of manuscripts and block prints in the library of the Hemis monastery in Ladakh. The Tibetan manuscript, incomplete and obviously “very old”, contains, in addition to some legends and visions, the travel route of O rgyan pa’s pilgrimage, which probably took place after 1260.²¹ Tucci regards the itinerary to be “an almost contemporary record of a journey to a country which was already considered as a magic land, and was seen through the eyes of a man who had no sight for reality” (Tucci 1971: 13).

The appearance of O rgyan pa in Lahul is not solidly confirmed. He began his journey to Uḍḍiyāna from Tise (the original name of Mount

¹⁹Tucci (1971: 372) explains that the name O rgyan pa actually means “man of O rgyan” and was given to the pilgrim when he and his journey to Uḍḍiyāna became famous.

²⁰O rgyan pa belonged to a subgroup of the ’Brug pa sect and is mentioned in the *Chos ’byung* of Padma dkar po (b. 1527), also an adept of the same mystic school and one of the most famous polygraphs in Tibet (Tucci 1971: 372)

²¹This date refers to the fact that O rgyan pa met Karma Pakshi on the way to China. Since Karma Pakshi, who died in 1283, appointed O rgyan pa as his assistant, Tucci suspects that Karma Pakshi was at that time already an old man. This implies a date for the pilgrimage after 1260 (Tucci 1971: 6).

Kailash), passed Lake Manasarovar and “arrived at Kulu (Ku lu ṭa) [Kulutā] or Maru, which correspond to the knees and the toes of the *vajra*-body divided into twenty-four great places” (Tucci 1971: 392). Tucci contradicts S. Lévi, who identified Maru with Chitral, and suggests that according to Tibetan tradition these sites are situated in Kulu or in the upper Chandrabhaga valley, bordering Chamba. Tucci further notes that the name Maru is considered to be the name of the reviver of the solar race and the ancestor of the Chamba rulers as mentioned in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, the Chamba chronicle (Tucci 1971: 392). While Toni Huber (2008: 101, fig. 4.3, 109) maps Maru south of Kulutā in the area of Mandi and Kangra, Kun dga’ rin po che referred rather to a site opposite of Triloknath in the Chandrabhaga valley. O rgyan pa’s list of place names would suggest that Huber’s attribution to the south is more logical and that the pilgrim never went through Lahul. The fact that O rgyan pa seems to totally ignore this area is rather astounding considering the fact that Lahul was obviously a special place for his master rGod tshang pa, who is supposed to have spent quite some time there. While rGod tshang pa was probably attracted by the mystical atmosphere and remote setting of Lahul, O rgyan pa’s primary aim was to reach Uḍḍiyāna via the faster, and maybe also easier, southern route rather than by climbing over the high passes that enclose Lahul. Nevertheless, it is possible that the compiler of the travelogue wanted to convey the impression that O rgyan pa came to Lahul. According to the itinerary, he and his consorts “did in one day the road [to Maru] which to an ordinary man takes seven days, without relenting or being tired either in body or in spirit” (Tucci 1971: 392). Tucci brings the fast locomotion together with a yoga practise that is believed to allow this high speed of travelling. The narration continues with the meeting of a “female *kṣetrapāla* dropping pus and blood from the nose”, identified by Tucci (1971: 392) as a *ḍākinī*. Linrothe (1999: 21) explains that the main function of a *kṣetrapāla* is the protection of territory and that in Tibetan paintings of later Tibetan Buddhism one finds a set of eight *kṣetrapālas* as the guardians of the eight cemeteries. The encounter with a female *kṣetrapāla* or a *ḍākinī* might refer to the charnel ground at the confluence of the rivers Bhaga and Chandra in Lahul (FIGURE 7.11) and might be meant as a description of O rgyan pa’s miraculous travel through Lahul, the land of fairies. After this event, he left to Uḍḍiyāna. On his way back he passed through Kashmir and Ladakh. O rgyan pa’s pilgrimage then led him to Nepal, where he visited more *pīṭha* places (Huber 2008: 104).



Figure 7.11 Confluence of Bhaga and Chandra rivers with the cremation ground. Photo: V. Widorn 2007

The Journey of sTag tshang ras pa

Many place names in the itinerary of O rgyan pa are also found (although with different spellings) in the travel reports of sTag tshang ras pa, who seems to have in part followed the pilgrimage route of his ancestor on the advice of his teacher.²² Peter Schwiieger (1996: 99) writes that “Uddiyāna was still a popular destination, but only in the imagination of Tibetan yogins, so it was a journey into the uncertain”.²³ sTag tshang ras pa reached Lahul by a rather circuitous route (FIGURE 7.3). He started from Tise and passed through the province of Guge and the narrow valley of Kunu (Kinnaur). Following the Sutlej river, he came to Kangra, Jalandhara and Kashmir. He finally entered Lahul from the Zanskar side where he met

²²The biography of sTag tshang ras pa, the founder of the Hemis monastery, was compiled twelve years after his death in 1663 (Petech 1977: 3). It is accessible in Hemis and divided into three sections: the biography proper, the pilgrimage itinerary, and songs by sTag tshang ras pa in the style of poems from Milarepa (Tucci 1971: 384).

²³Schwiieger (1996: 100) assigns the beginning of this fifth big journey of sTag tshang ras pa to the year 1613 CE.

the great *siddha* bDe ba rgya mtsho, and spent two months with him (Tucci 1971: 410).²⁴

Tucci (1971: 410–411) reports:

They [sTag tshang ras pa and his consorts] reached Ga śa. The king of the place, Ts'e rin dpal lde, rendered service to them for three months. Then in K'an gсар they were attended by the younger sister of the king with her son [...]. They also visited places near Lāhul, such as Gandhola, Gusa mandala, Re p'ag and Maru, corresponding to the toes of the *vajrakāya*. In winter they sat in retreat for six months in gYur dson. Then, for two months they went to Dar rtse, where was the king. Altogether they spent an entire year in Ga śa. [...] he [sTag tshang ras pa] went with a single monk from Dar rtse to K'an gсар, sKye nan, Gusamaṇḍala where begins the country of Kuluta corresponding to the knees of the *vajrakāya*....

Tucci identifies “sKye nan” and the king from “Ga śa” as Tinan and its ruler Tshe ring rgyal po, the brother or son of bSod nams rgya mtsho, whose reign is attested for around 1569 CE. Francke brings up a document from Kolong that, commemorating the erection of a *stūpa* around 1584 CE, mentions the name of a rGyal po Tshe ring or rGyal po Tshe ring dpal lde and a place called Zhi la, which Francke locates in the principality of Tinan (Francke 1926: 218). Tinan, however, is situated in the Chandra valley, and, according to the itinerary, sTag tshang ras pa spent most of the time in the Bhaga valley at “K'an gсар” (obviously corresponding to the Thakur castle Khangsar), in “Dar rtse” (corresponding to Darcha, the first village in Lahul when descending from Ladakh), and also in “gYur dson” (most likely the afore mentioned monastery Yoldong attributed to rGod tshang pa). Thus, it is possible that sTag tshang ras pa went not to Tinan, but only as far as the Gusamaṇḍala, which may be identified with the small village of Gus or Gushal at the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga. There is no indication that he ever travelled in the Chandra valley.

²⁴On the one hand, sTag tshang ras pa is considered to be a contemporary of the Ladakhi king Sen ge rnam rgyal, whose dates are given as about 1600 to 1645 in the *Chronicles of Ladakh*. On the other hand, he met the famous lama bDe ba rgya mtsho (Deva rgya mtsho) in Zanskar on his way to Lahul (Tucci 1971: 410), who, according to the chronological account of Lahul, lived in the 16th century (Francke undated: 34).

It is more likely that either the Thakurs of Kolong²⁵ (the lords of Khangsar castle on the northern/right bank of the Bhaga river)²⁶ or the *jos* (Thakur) of Barbog near Kardang accommodated the pilgrims, although there is no name in either of their chronicles that could correspond to the name of the king mentioned in the itinerary.²⁷

Several *stūpas* line the road to the old castle of Khangsar near the village Kolong. One passage *stūpa* (FIGURE 7.12) attracts the attention of the traveller, since it differs drastically from the smaller, simpler ones in Lahuli style. The passage *stūpa*, erected on a square platform, probably made of stone and bricks and thickly plastered, is in good condition apart from the wooden *chattra* at the top that is broken and now kept in the empty, undecorated dome of the gateway. It is possible that the drum was damaged and later repaired when the *chattra* collapsed or was removed. However, the elaborate double-staircase form with unusual small openings is a unique form and seems to be original, but is uncommon in this area. This form is broadly reminiscent of a Western Tibetan *stūpa* type as one finds it in Tholing.²⁸ One *stūpa* on top of the roof of the Ye shes 'od Temple, and one of the Eight Great Stūpas depicted in the wall paintings of the Red Temple present this peculiar accentuation of the vertical displaced middle segment. Gerald Kozicz has recently discovered a group of

²⁵The chronicle of Kolong states that the Thakur family was in charge of Lahul when the region was under Tibetan rule, that is, till the beginning of the 17th century. This is doubted by Francke, who believes that the chiefs of Barbog were the governors during that time (Francke 1926: 206). The chronicle, however, emphasizes that “during this time Lāmās and Gurūs were introduced into this country” (Francke 1926: 202). Till this time, the Kolong ancestors had Tibetan names, which might also indicate their Tibetan origin, which was later on denied by the descendants. Frank Seeliger reports that the kings of Kulu and the power of the Thakur families from Kolong, Barbog and Triloknath reinforced Hinduism in Lahul during the seventeenth centuries. Conversion to Hinduism was carried to extremes in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Hari Chand, of the Kolong dynasty, married a Hindu woman. The Moravian missionaries remark on his fundamentalist practising of Hindu beliefs, which exceeded the common caste system (Seeliger 2003: 166).

²⁶Tucci erroneously locates Khangsar on the left bank of the Bhaga (Tucci 1971: 410).

²⁷For further information on the chronicles and the genealogical tree of the Thakurs of Kolong, Barbog and Tinan, see Francke 1926: 195–220.

²⁸I am thankful to Gerald Kozicz for this suggestion. In the last years Kozicz documented and measured an impressive amount of different *stūpa*-types all over Ladakh and provides a first compilation of this survey on his website (last visited 24-03-2013): <http://stupa.arch-research.at/cms/index.php?id=4>.



Figure 7.12 Passage *stūpa* near Khangsar castle in Kolong. Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

hitherto less known *stūpas* in Ladakh that are structurally similar to the monument in Khangsar. Among them is the *stūpa* of Tragkhung Kowache in the Indus valley.²⁹ In contrast to Khangsar, the Ladakhi version provides small niches on the middle part of each step. With regard to the Western Tibetan model, Kozicz dates the *stūpa* with niches in Tragkhung Kowache to the 11th/12th century. This is indeed an early but acceptable date also for the passage *stūpa* in Khangsar, which seems to have been influenced by the Ladakhi examples.

Also the impressive multi-storey fort high on the hill with a wide view of the river and the entire Bhaga valley appears as if it might have been inspired by the prestigious palaces of Ladakh, such as the Stok or the Leh palace (FIGURE 7.13). The massive stone building possesses an amazing number of rooms³⁰ and a large inner courtyard surrounded by tall wooden columns with fanciful, carved brackets (FIGURE 7.14). The atrium, which

²⁹See <http://stupa.arch-research.at/cms/index.php?id=131> (last visited 24-03-2013).

³⁰The old caretaker of the castle used to emphasize that the palace consists of 108 rooms, which may not correspond to the real number of chambers but shows that this auspicious number is also implemented in architectural concepts of secular buildings.



Figure 7.13 Khangsar castle near Kolong. Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

provides light for the adjoining chambers and is where rainwater is collected in a wooden cistern, functions as the centre and meeting place of the castle, and in summer also as the cooking and sleeping area for the domestic servants. One reaches the different floors and the flat roof by means of various loose wooden ladders. The third floor not only contains the dining hall and the parlour, but also a small chapel decorated with a fine collection of thangkas, probably from no earlier than the 18th or 19th century. The chapel is furthermore filled with Tibetan manuscripts stacked in old wooden bookshelves (FIGURE 7.15).

It is not difficult to imagine that sTag tshang ras pa spent several months in this sophisticated environment discussing and “explaining various doctrines, such as the *mahāmudrā*, the six laws of Nāropa, the *prāṇayoga*, the law of the karmic connection, the esoteric methods, the teachings of Mar pa, Mi la ras pa and Dvags po rje, the story of the law, the Mani bka’ ’bum etc.” (Tucci 1971: 410), and probably decided to visit Ladakh on his return journey from Uḍḍiyāna.

The setting of Kolong and the castle allows for a good view to the east, where the valley broadens in the direction of Darcha, the northernmost village of Himachal Pradesh on the route to Ladakh and Zanskar. In the west, the Bhaga becomes wild and powerful, cutting its channel deep into



Figure 7.15 Book shelves with manuscripts in the chapel of Khangsar castle. Photo: V. Widorn 2002, WHAV



Figure 7.14 Courtyard of the Khangsar castle. Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

the mountains. At the western end of the valley, also on the right river bank, Yoldong was constructed under a rock overhang on a nearly vertical cliff (see FIGURE 7.9). The monastery nearly conflates with the crag, and it is still inhabited by one high lama who is frequented by local people for medical advice. The cave-like setting, only accessible by a steep and narrow path, must have been a terrific place for sTag tshang ras pa's retreat in wintertime. No paintings or furniture in the monastery can be dated to the time of the famous pilgrim.

After the one year that sTag tshang ras pa spent in Khangsar, Darcha and Yoldong, he continued on his travels towards the Chandrabhaga valley. Schwieger reports that, according to the biography, "he set off again at the first calendar day of the eighth month in the wood hare year", which corresponds to August 25, 1615 (Schwieger 1996: 101). sTag tshang ras pa's first stop was Gusamaṇḍala, corresponding to Gushal, a small village located directly at the confluence of the Bhaga and Chandra rivers. This place is auspicious because it is a charnel and cremation ground, obviously used by Hindus and Buddhists alike, and associated with one of the eight charnel grounds of Padmasaṃbhava.

From this spot on, after the two rivers merge, the valley is called the Chandrabhaga or Chenab valley, or Pattan. In contrast to the other two valleys of Lahul, the majority of the population in this region is Hindu, mainly Śaiva. The itinerary of sTag tshang ras pa reports (Tucci 1971: 410):

Then in two days he reached Re phag, where there is the image of sPyan ras gzigs in the form of a 'Gro drug sgröl ye śes. The image is made in stone from Ka ma ru. Then in one day to Maru, in two days to Pata; then to the bottom of the Ko ta la pass; having crossed the pass full of snow, he reached Pangi and then Sura and then Na rañ.

Re phag is today called Triloknath, a popular pilgrimage center for both Hindus and Buddhists, spectacularly located at the edge of a cliff high above the Chandrabhaga (FIGURE 7.16). The *māhātmya* of Triloknath³¹ tells of the genesis of Ras 'phags, the Tibetan name of Triloknath, and gives a description of the marble Avalokiteśvara, the main idol of the temple. The name Ras 'phags, or Re phag as it is called by the local people, is

³¹The *māhātmya* was collected by Francke and translated by Johannes Schubert (1935). According to the colophon, which contains the names of the author, the carver and the printer, the block print can be dated to 1905 (Schubert 1935: 77).



Figure 7.17 Entrance to the sanctum with a decorated Sugatisamdaršana Lokeśvara. Photo: M. Kimberger 2007



Figure 7.16 Triloknath. Photo: V. Widorn 2004, WHAV

considered by Francke to be derived from the Tibetan word *re ba*, which means “hope”. According to Schubert, the local name and the reference to hope explain perfectly one reason for visiting this pilgrimage site, namely the wish of childless couples for offspring.³² However the syllable *ras* may also refer to sPyan ras gzigs, Avalokiteśvara, as Schubert (1935: 127) explains.

On the one hand, Triloknath is said to have been founded by the Paṇḍavas, making the site one of the earliest traces of Hindu worship. Francke (undated: 15), on the other hand, refers to a chronological account of Lahul, the *legs bshad rtsi gсар rin chen dun 'byung*, which mentions the name of Nāgārjuna, who is believed to have founded the Triloknath monastery around 100 CE. Francke further reports that another local tale tells of Dril bu pa having founded the ancient monastery in the 6th or 7th century.

The Triloknath temple complex tries to fulfil the demands of Buddhists and Hindus (FIGURE 7.16). The sacred compound contains a wide courtyard, decorated with Śiva symbols and Buddhist prayer flags, a *liṅga* shrine and a chapel with a huge *maṇi* wheel. The temple itself possesses a well-spaced anteroom with a simple gable-roof that leads to the *śikhara* structure of the sanctum. The sanctum is erected on a square ground plan in the *nagara* fashion with a rather massive *śikhara* and a richly decorated facade (FIGURE 7.17).³³ This is certainly one of the oldest parts of the temple. The large avalanche of 1979 destroyed some parts of the monument along with many houses nearby. The sanctum with the main idol was miraculously left intact.³⁴ According to Verma (1998: 112), the hall,

³²This assumption can not be confirmed by local tradition. However, Surinder M. Bhardwaj, who examined Hindu pilgrimage sites in India, emphasizes “that high-level sacred places of ‘supraregional’ character are visited largely for general purification, while the regional- and subregional-level shrines seem to be specific-purpose oriented” (Bhardwaj 1973: 162). He refers to the wish-granting characteristic of female deities and their symbolic meaning of fertility, abundance and prosperity within the Himalayan region. Especially the Devī shrines of Himachal Pradesh, such as the Mirkulā Devī Temple of Udaipur, which is closely connected to Triloknath, may also be associated with the particular purpose of pilgrimage mentioned above.

³³For a detailed survey of the monument, drawings and measurements of the sanctum, and descriptions of carvings and sculptural decoration see Widorn and Kozicz 2012.

³⁴The sanctum was already spared once before, when in 1863 an avalanche destroyed nearly the whole village (Verma 1998: 112). I was told by Nawang Jinpa from the Young Drukpa Association, Lahul, that fragments of the destroyed building were recently found at the bottom of the cliff.

together with the narrow ambulatory around the stone shrine, seems to have been reconstructed based on the original plan. Thomas Maxwell visited the south-facing temple before the avalanche and gives the following detailed description of the *antarāla* (Maxwell 1980: 60):

This structure is not original...it is a windowless chamber, more expertly built of stone blocks, but its surfaces are not molded or sculptured. Inside, it is arranged like a makeshift Tibetan prayer-hall. Blackened thangkas hang on the walls, large drums of the type used in the Kyelang gonpas are suspended from the ceiling. Against the east wall stands a Buddhist altar with ritual vessels [...].

The hall today is no longer so “Tibetan”. There is still a huge butter lamp in the south-west corner, and a Buddhist monk performs the rituals together with a Hindu priest. Pilgrims, when crossing the room to approach the sanctum, also use this space for musical performances for the deity. In his article, Maxwell published two photographs of the decayed *pradakṣiṇāpatha* around the sanctum before the last renovation. It shows the *vimāna* walls together with a row of *maṇi* wheels and wooden pillars. Maxwell (1980: 61) calls them “Tibetan Buddhist pillars”, as their brackets are very common in the Buddhist monasteries of Lahul. Compared with them, the brackets of two stone pillars in front of the sanctum certainly belong to the original stone structure of the building and depict two seated Buddhas. Triloknath is therefore the only Buddhist *nagara* temple in the Himalayan area and might have been influenced by the stone temples of Chamba, Kulu and Kangra, although the *sikhara* in Triloknath has a more compact structure and simple decoration. It is difficult to date precisely the founding of the Triloknath temple, as the building has undergone many changes and renovations. No part of the monument’s current structure is as old as local tradition holds the monument to be. The monument was obviously constructed before the second diffusion of Buddhism (10th/11th century) in Western Tibet.

The celebrated site in the Chandrabhaga valley is even today highly revered by Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims from the neighbouring districts and even beyond Himachal Pradesh. The annual Pori fair in August attracts thousands of pilgrims to the *tīrtha*, where Hindus from all over India worship the “Lord of three Worlds” (*triloknāth*), and Buddhists the marble image of Avalokiteśvara. As mentioned in the itinerary, the idol shows a six-armed Avalokiteśvara in *lalitāsana*. For most of the time, the body

of the marble sculpture is covered with heavy, expensive textiles, while the small Amitābha located in its hair, which identifies the sculpture as clearly Buddhist, is always visible (FIGURE 7.17). The figure in the form of a Sugatisaṃdarśana Lokeśvara sits on a high pedestal holding a lotus, a baton, a flask, and a jewel in four of its hands. One of its right hands displays *varadamudrā*, while another right hand holds a *mālā* in front of his breast. The itinerary of sTag tshang ras pa mentions that the image is made of stone from Ka ma ru, which Tucci (1971: 411) identifies as a place in the upper Chandrabhaga valley near Chamba. There is also another artefact, made of stone and also depicting a Sugatisaṃdarśana Lokeśvara, that is now kept behind the altar and is said to be the original idol.³⁵ The bodhisattva also sits in *lalitāsana* on a high lotus pedestal, his right front arm is broken, while the others hold the typical attributes of a stylized *padma*, *mālā*, *kamaṇḍalu*, *maṇi*, one hand shows *varadamudrā*. The dark stone figure with its rosette-shaped crown that has an Amitābha on top of it, the body with the broad shoulders, the narrow waist and sharply cut belly clearly display an 8th century Kashmiri style. It is unknown when the original bodhisattva image was replaced by the much later marble copy.³⁶ The use of the term “stone” and not “marble” in sTag tshang ras pa’s itinerary would rather indicate that it was still the dark stone image that was being worshipped in the 17th century.³⁷

After visiting Triloknath, sTag tshang ras pa went in one day to Maru which, based on the short distance, can be identified as the village of Udaipur some miles down the river on the right bank of the Chandrabhaga. As already mentioned, it is highly questionable whether the Maru mentioned in O rgyan pa’s itinerary is identical with Maru in the Chandrabhaga valley that was visited by sTag tshang ras pa three hundred years later. The pilgrims of the seventeenth century most likely took the same footpath from Triloknath down to Maru or Udaipur as people do nowadays. The small trail goes past some fragments of unique stone slabs with

³⁵Both images are published in Handa (2001: III.16–17).

³⁶Sahni reports that “there is a belief that when people go to see this idol, it shows a dark gloomy face to those with whom the lord is unhappy while it shows a bright white face to those with whom the lord is happy.” (Sahni 1994: 251) This story might have been inspired by the existence of two differently coloured images with the same iconography.

³⁷The importance of Triloknath increased in the following centuries. Stutchbury (1991: 68) reports two prominent persons among the numbers of pilgrims visiting Triloknath, namely sPrul gzhi ngag dbang tshes ring of the ‘Brug pa bKa’ brgyud order and the dGe lugs pa lama Tshul khrims nyi ma, who lived in the 18th century.



Figure 7.18 Fountain stone on the footpath from Triloknath to Udaipur.
Photo: V. Widorn 2007

ornamental and figurative carvings. These artefacts were mainly used as fountain stones installed at the many springs flowing down to the Chandrabhaga. The figurative carvings display predominantly religious scenes like deities from the Hindu pantheon, river goddesses and *nāgas*. Popular topics are Anantaśayana or Viṣṇu and his *avatāras* including Buddha. Fountain slabs were frequently found all over Lahul and Chamba, and are valuable historical evidence because they often contain inscriptions with the name of the patron and the date of production. Despite the great variety of topics, there is one recurring motive, namely the presentation of the adoration of the Śiva *liṅga* by the patron(s). One damaged stone on the path down from Udaipur shows on the left side a couple sitting cross-legged in front-view next to a *liṅga* on which the female adherent is pouring the liquid (FIGURE 7.18). On the opposite side of the worshipping scene sits another figure in *padmāsana*, quite weathered but by means of the bangles, necklaces and long hair falling on the shoulders still recognizable as Śiva in his ascetic form. Above the frieze is depicted a pair of *hamsas* facing each other with a vase between them, also a common mo-

tive in this area. Although there is no visible inscription, the stone can be dated to medieval times due to the elaborated style.³⁸

sTag tshang ras pa probably passed this and/or similar stones on his way from Triloknath to the *pīṭha* he considered the toes of the *vajrakāya*. Tobdan maintains that “indeed Margul [Maru] was recognized by the Tibetan pilgrims as the most important tīrtha among all the sacred places situated in Lahul” (Tobdan 1984: 86). He further explains that the site “Maru-tse” mentioned in Tibetan historical works as well as the name Maru found in itinerary reports of Tibetan pilgrims like rGod tshang pa refers to “Margul” in Lahul (Tobdan 1984: 86).³⁹

Even if we can not locate the exact position of the *pīṭha* that sTag tshang ras pa considered as Maru and sought after—maybe in order to find the meditation cave of the *dākinī* Vajravārāhī—the place must have been situated in or near Udaipur at the confluence of the Maiyar Nallah with the Chandrabhaga. Jean Phillippe Vogel (1911: 15) was the first to mention that the wooden Mirkulā (or Markulā) Devī Temple⁴⁰ in Udaipur is a shrine dedicated to Kālī, who is locally known as Goddess Markulā or Mar sgul. The latter spelling is found on an inscription on a stone slab that was found near Udaipur by J. E. Duncan and translated by Francke. Vogel refers to Francke,⁴¹ who maintains that the Buddhists of Lahul worship the goddess of Markulā as rDo rje phag mo or Vajravārāhī and that

³⁸For comparisons with fountain stones from the region, now kept in the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba, see Vogel 1911 and Sethi 2002.

³⁹Tobdan traces the name “Margul” back to Margul Guru, the founder of the Tag lung pa school who protected Menzhang, a village that Svetoslav Roerich assigns to Purang. Tobdan points out that one finds a place originally named Men-zhang (now Kishori) just below Triloknath and supposes that there was probably a connection between this place and Margul. The fact that Margul Guru is described in Tibetan historical works as a monk residing in Margul indicates for Tobdan that Margul was a permanent residence for gurus and lamas (Tobdan 1984: 85). Unfortunately Tobdan does not name his sources for these theories.

⁴⁰The origin and etymology of the name Mirkulā or Markulā has so far not been discussed in scholarly literature. It probably derives from one of the local dialects like Manchad.

⁴¹The famous Herrnhuter missionary, A. H. Francke, never visited Udaipur, although he spent some time at the missionary station in Kyelong between 1907 and 1908. He visited most of the villages and sacred sites of Lahul, but mainly those of the Bhaga and Chandra valley. In his unpublished manuscript on the “Ancient History on Lahul” (kept in the Archive of the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde), he notes that:

Margul [...] is a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists as well as Hindus. The



Figure 7.19 Mirkulā Devī Temple, Udaipur. Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

according to the stone inscription, the temple formed part of the monastery of Mar sgul before it was reconverted into a Hindu sanctuary (Vogel 1911: 249, 267–68).

The Mirkulā Devī Temple is situated along the main road elevated in the center of the village of Udaipur (FIGURE 7.19). The shrine is aligned on an east-west axis and built on a platform on a slope; it is reached by a short flight of steps, recently rebuilt by the Archaeological Survey of India, and is flanked by a lion statue on either side. The external walls consist of masonry mixed with timber elements and are covered on the inner and outer sides with a coat of plaster. The temple has an unusually steep gable-type roof with wooden shingles covering the *maṇḍapa* and an almost vertical

Hindus go to worship Kali, the wife of Siva, and the Tibetans worship rDorje phagmo. [...] That Margul may be an ancient Buddhist place of worship, is made probable by the wood carving of Mara's attack on Buddha in the ceiling of the temple, discovered by Dr. Vogel, and by the fact that a Tibetan inscription brought to light by Miss Jane Duncan, speaks of Margul as a dgonpa. (Francke undated: 15)

conical roof over the sanctum and the ambulatory. The interior of the monument, erected on a rectangular ground plan with a square cell sanctuary that is surrounded by a narrow ambulatory, contains an overwhelmingly rich wooden decoration, which covers the front of the *garbhagrha*, the whole ceiling of the *maṇḍapa* and both sides of the window balcony on the south wall. The oldest part of the wooden structure, the facade of the sanctum, may date back to the 9th century, but it has also been extended over the centuries.⁴² The extremely rich and splendid wooden decoration of the interior shows mainly Hindu deities and narrative scenes referring to the Mahābhārata and Ramāyana. Some Buddhist elements, such as the scene on the ceiling showing Buddha's temptation by Māra and his evil forces, or some lotus-ornaments, are seen as indicators that the Mirkulā Devī Temple was a Buddhist pilgrimage centre for several centuries. According to the iconographic program, the shrine might originally have been dedicated to Viṣṇu or Sūrya. But nowadays the Mirkulā Devī Temple is one of the popular Devī shrines in Himachal Pradesh, with a Durgā Mahiṣāsura-mardinī as the main idol (FIGURE 7.20). Based on the inscription on the pedestal, the small brass statuette was dated by Vogel (1911: 249–250) to the middle of the 16th century, and must have been worshipped already at the time of sTag tshang ras pa. The temple is visited daily by Buddhist and Hindu practitioners, but the Durgā image, which is always covered with splendid garments and flower garlands, is considered to be rDo rje phag mo or Vajravārāhī by the Buddhist community.

If there ever was a monastery or a Buddhist site named Maru or Mar sgul in or near Udaipur, it had certainly vanished by the end of the 17th century when Raja Udai Singh of Chamba, who ruled between 1690 and 1720 (Hutchinson and Vogel 1933: 309–310) became the name patron of the village. Goetz presumes that this happened around 1695 “when Raja Udai Singh raised it [the village Udaipur] to the status of a district center in the part of Lahul which his father Chattar (or Satru) Singh (1664–1690) had annexed to the Chamba State” (Goetz 1955: 90). The *Vaṃśāvalī* reports that the *rājā* raised some money from the production of a copper mine for the restoration of several temples (Bharti 2001: 54–55). Then, like the rest of the Chandrabhaga valley, Udaipur became a stronghold of Hinduism — interfering with Buddhist tradition and the indigenous worship of local deities.

⁴²See Widorn (2007, 152–154). A publication of the thesis is currently in preparation.



Figure 7.20 Durgā Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, Mirkulā Devī Temple, Udaipur.
Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

It is unclear which route sTag tshang ras pa chose to leave Lahul and proceed to Chamba. He did not seem to follow rGod tshang pa's track over the Kugti Pass and the Manimahesh Kailash to Brahmaur. The spelling of the place names in sTag tshang ras pa's itinerary does not show any accordance with the local topography.⁴³ Today the common way to Chamba is the route via Mindal and Kilar over the Sach pass,⁴⁴ but any of the other passes still regularly traversed by the Gaddis might just as well have been used by the pilgrims.

Sanctifying the Landscape in Lahul

The travels of the three pilgrims through the Western Himalayan region and their paths through (or at least near Lahul) reveal different intentions, strategies and accomplishments. Toni Huber writes that “perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the journeys of Götsangpa and Orgyenpa [...] were their claims for the location of the *pīṭha* which they visited.” (Huber 2008: 108). The visit and the identification of the various *pīṭhas* associated with the *vajrakāya* were certainly of great interest for the 'Brug pa adepts of the 13th century and most likely the initial reason for their travels.

rGod tshang pa belonged to the first generation of pilgrims who ignored the significance of the popular *aṣṭamahāsthāna*, the eight great sites, from the Ganges plain up to Lumbini, connected directly to the eight great events in the Buddha's life. Huber refuses to blame the decline of Buddhism in North India for the shift of the *vajrakāya* to the Himalayan region as this would imply social and political factors rather than spiritual concepts. He also contradicts Mark Dyczkowski's idea that high Tantric practitioners were able to re-project and visualize the original *pīṭha* onto a local landscape in order to visit the sacred sites also in other parts of India (Huber 2008: 108–109). He alternately suggests that the early 13th century is the starting point of a new Tantric Buddhist *pīṭha*-system of

⁴³ There is a 'Brug pa monastery in the Pangī valley called Sural (Sura?) Monastery, but it seems to be rather new. For further information on the Pangī valley, see Chaudhry 1998.

⁴⁴ Reportedly there has been road construction going on recently — however, most of the year the pass and also the road through the Pangī valley are only accessible via foot due to constant landslides or avalanches.

twenty-four external sites that has since been adapted several times, according to religious and social dynamics (Huber 2008: 109). In the 13th century the *pīṭhas* of the *vajrakāya* were located in the Indian Himalayan area, creating a corridor of auspicious sites from Western Tibet to the Hindukush. Huber mentions the *pīṭha* Maru as a place that actually names a region in Rajasthan, but which has been identified by O rgyan pa as a site in the southern region of the Himalayan range. Although sTag tshang ras pa used O rgyan pa's travelogue and intended to follow his itinerary, it is not astonishing that he transferred this *pīṭha* corresponding to the toes of the *vajrakāya* to the Chandrabhaga valley, which was certainly a reasonable adjustment of his travel route from Lahul to Chamba. It is uncertain whether it was a significant coincidence that Udaipur and the Mirkulā Devī Temple were already connected to a place called Maru or Mar gyul before the 17th century, or whether this myth was just created as a reaction to sTag tshang ras pa's visit. Nevertheless, the important function of the Mirkulā Devī Temple as a Buddhist site that is associated with Vajravārāhī is also demonstrated in the *māhātmya* of Triloknath (Schubert 1935: 135–136). “Mar gyul”, representing the mind or heart of Vajravārāhī or rDo rje phag mo, forms a spiritual trinity together with Dril bu ri, the Buddha's body that is associated with Cakrasaṃvara, and Triloknath, the location of the Speech associated with Avalokiteśvara (see also Stutchbury 1991: 64). Referring to these three sites Elisabeth A. Stutchbury also points out the “apparent ambiguity in identity between Hindu and Buddhist [...] and the continuing operation of pilgrimage sites which are both Hindu and Buddhist, such as Triloknath, the Markula Devī mandir and the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga Rivers” (Stutchbury 1991: 55).

This ambiguity of identity certainly derives from the *pīṭha* concept that the pilgrims of the 13th century employed for geographical sites in India which they associated with the victory of the wrathful Buddhist deity Heruka over Maheśvara (Huber 2008: 104–105). Huber states that common Hindu symbols were adapted by the Buddhist Tantric system to justify a *pīṭha* network in the Himalayan area that consisted mainly of Śaiva and Śākta places (Huber 2008: 106). This phenomenon is clearly visible in Lahul, as already demonstrated by reference to the main idols of the sanctuaries of Triloknath and Udaipur which are worshipped by various religious communities. The lantern ceiling of the Mirkulā Devī Temple further contains a splendid lotus-rosette encircled by a row of highly-styl-



Figure 7.21 Ceiling with circle of *trisūlas* or *vajras*. Photo: V. Widorn 2007, WHAV

ized *trisūla* similar to and often read as a circle of double-*vajra* not only by the Buddhist practitioners (FIGURE 7.21).⁴⁵

The Dril bu ri as the conspicuous core of Lahul's sacred landscape and the above mentioned pilgrimage triangle (Dril bu ri, Triloknath and Udaipur) was considered the abode of Śiva's *liṅga* before it became the residence of Cakrasaṃvara. The oral tradition of Chamba reports that Śiva, being disturbed by some *yogins*, left the Dril bu ri and flew to the Manimahesh Kailash in Chamba. The Buddhist tradition, however, claims that Ghāṇṭapa, one of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, converted the peak of the Dril bu ri into a *maṇḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara. Although the activities of the *siddha*, who is supposed to have lived in the 9th century, are normally placed in the area of Nālandā and Orissa, Dowman (1985: 274–275) claims that Ghāṇṭapa was instructed to go to Uḍḍiyāna.⁴⁶ Ghāṇṭapa,

⁴⁵See, for example, Goetz 1955: 113, Maxwell 1980: 47–49, Klimburg-Salter 1994: 55.

⁴⁶Eighty-four *siddhas* including Ghāṇṭapa are also considered to have travelled to Brahmapura where they worshipped Śiva, as recorded in the *Vaṃśāvalī* for the time of Sahila Varman. However, the date of this event is discussed by Tucci and Goetz (Goetz 1955: 32), and by Kamal Prashad Sharma (2001: 74–85).

whose name means “the one with the bell” (*dril bu pa* in Tibetan), is supposed to have lived together with a beautiful young girl, a *ḍākinī*, in the Chandrabhaga valley. Since the local people started gossiping about this relationship, the *siddha* became angry and threw his wife into the air. The *ḍākinī* turned into the bell-shaped mountain above the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga. Ghāṅṭapa himself turned into Cakrasaṃvara, flew after her, and now lives there with his wife, turning the peak of the Dril bu ri into a *maṇḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara.⁴⁷

A day-long circumambulation route leads around the peak of the holy mountain, starting from Kardang and ending either in the village Gondhla or at the monastery of Guru Ghantal. It is regularly performed by the local people.⁴⁸ The special geological formation creates in the landscape of Lahul a *maṇḍala*-like topography. The whole area of Lahul is surrounded by the high peaks of the Great Himalayan Divide and the Zaskar Himalayan range, and only four major passes (the Kunzum la to Spiti in the east, the Rothang la to Kulu in the south, the Sach la to Chamba in the west, and the Baralacha la to Ladakh in the north) permit vehicular travel enabling economic exchange with the neighbouring regions. This particular geographical setting can be interpreted as a semantic analogy to the outer circle of a *maṇḍala* with its gates opening into all four directions. Originating from opposite corners of Chandratul lake near the Baralacha pass and flowing in different directions, the rivers Chandra and Bhaga join again at the base of the sacred mountain Dril bu

⁴⁷Mountains play a pivotal role in Lahul. Elizabeth Stutchbury in her article about the perception of the Lahuli landscape demonstrates, by referring to a prayer from the 18th century, that the peak of the Dril bu ri is “the central spot where three valleys come together; is the place of the triangle from which all the phenomena originate.” The poem describes the peaks of the surrounding mountains and concludes with the verses: “such is this best and most blessed place; an abode of the yogins of the past; a place for the practitioners of the future” (Stutchbury 1999: 158). Important and worshipped mountains are the Karkyogs double peak (opposite the Dril bu ri) and the high peak in the Chandra valley at Sissu, which is considered the abode of Gephang, the mountain protector of Lahul.

⁴⁸For a detailed description of the day-long *skor ba* (circumambulation) see Stutchbury 1991: 70–73 and Widorn and Kinberger 2009: 293–304. I was told by Nawang Jinpa, that the term “Korzha Khandroling” for the pilgrimage circuit around the Dril bu ri, as used by Stutchbury and later by myself, is totally unknown to the local people, the more so because the spelling of Garzha with K seems to be rather unusual. He also emphasized that Stutchbury’s perception of Lahul as a *maṇḍala* was only her personal vision which is not shared by the inhabitants. Still, the circuit (or *parikrama*) around the Dril bu ri is a ritual frequently performed by the local people.

ri and flow as the Chandrabhaga or Chenab river towards Jammu and Kashmir and further on to Pakistan. The course of the rivers is another natural component of a *maṇḍala* structure with the sacred mountain in the center. The exceptional scenery of Lahul and the Dril bu ri was also realized and highly appreciated by rGod tshang pa, as can be seen from his biography (Tucci 1971: 378):

This mountain is one mile high and he saw on its top the self-born *stūpa* called *dharma mu tri*. On its four sides are miraculous rivers and trees. It is a place blessed by all *dpa' bo* and *ḍākinīs*: it is also the residence of *yogins* and *yoginīs* who have attained to perfection. It is a place absolutely superior to all others [...].

The dualism of female and male power, which rGod tshang pa referred to in his description, is particularly distinctive in Lahul. The Chandra ('moon') is normally regarded as the male, while the Bhaga represents the female power. In the legends of Lahul this polarity is switched: the Chandra is considered to be the daughter of the moon and the Bhaga the son of the sun god (Gill 1972: 15). The legend reports how the two rivers create a trail through the mountainous landscape of Lahul to be united at the foot of the Dril bu ri. The confluence of the rivers symbolizes the union of the female and the male "which geographically represent the yogic or tantric practices which achieve that union within the adept's mind-body" (Stutchbury 1991: 60).

From his travelogue it becomes evident that rGod tshang pa did not exclusively intend to reach Uḍḍiyāna and visit all twenty-four *pīṭhas*, but yearned for auspicious places for meditation and spiritual contemplation. He seems to have been fascinated by the energetic topography of Lahul, so that he returned to the remote location he had already visited at the slopes of the Dril bu ri. Since then, his fame as a *siddha* has additionally sanctified the landscape of Lahul. People not only consider him the miraculous founder of monasteries in the Bhaga valley, but have also identified his body imprints and his meditation cave which have become significant elements of the sacred landscape in Lahul and important stations on the circumambulation around the Dril bu ri.

Conclusion

The religious map that rGod tshang pa encountered when he travelled to Lahul in the 13th century was shaped by some monuments and artefacts of Mahāyāna Buddhism that obviously did not at all attract the pilgrim's primary attention. Despite the difficulties of linking the place names in the pilgrims' itineraries to real sites, monasteries and sanctuaries like Gumrang and Johling are not mentioned. rGod tshang pa and also his follower O rgyan pa were not interested in the old Buddhist tradition of the previous centuries. They were longing to complete the internal and external ritual journey to the twenty-four *pīthas* of the *vajrakāya*, and they were looking for extraordinary energetic places. rGod tshang pa preferred retreats at high altitudes, probably admiringly overlooking the three valleys and the confluence of the rivers and meditating at places he considered blessed by *siddhas* and *dākinīs*. Like *yogins* and *yoginīs* before him, he wanted to attain perfection. According to his travelogue rGod tshang pa only stayed in the immediate vicinity of the Dril bu ri—and also the monasteries Kardang and Yoldong, which are attributed to him, are close to this setting. Since his teacher did not identify any *pītha* in Lahul, O rgyan pa obviously did not even bother to travel that far, and omitted Lahul from his pilgrimage route. Any reference to Lahul in his biography is only fabulous and legendary. At the beginning of the 17th century, when sTag tshang ras pa visited Lahul and especially the Bhaga valley, the area had already started to flourish as a stronghold of the 'Brug pa order, which—after a period of fundamentalist Hindu rulers in the middle of the 19th century (Stutchbury 1991: 50)—it is until today. A dozen 'Brug pa monasteries overlook the entire Bhaga valley, situated within eyeshot of each other on both sides of the river high up into the mountains. Monasteries such as Shashur and Tayul, both on the right side of the valley, are considered foundations of the 17th century, possibly as a direct result of sTag tshang ras pa's one year sojourn and teaching in this region. In contrast to his predecessor, sTag tshang ras pa mainly resided at the right bank of the Upper Bhaga valley and probably as a guest of the rulers of Kolong. His travels in Lahul reflect his interest in meeting, communicating and interacting with “worldly as well as [...] spiritual persons of rank” as Schwieger (1996: 103) has already noticed. As an experienced, well-travelled and intellectual person, sTag tshang ras pa was a highly-coveted tantric practitioner whom even the king of Ladakh tried to entice to a visit to Ladakh (Schwieger 1996: 103).

The travels of rGod tshang pa and sTag tshang ras pa mark the beginning and the end of the search for the twenty-four holy sites of the *vajrakāya* in the Indian Himalayas and the spiritual journey to the mystical Uḍḍiyāna by Tibetan pilgrims. The interest in Uḍḍiyāna, long lost as a Buddhist paradise after the Muslim invasion, was shifted to other places and territories. Huber (2008: 113–114) has observed the transfer of Indian *pīṭhas* to Tibet with the rising of the 'Bri khung pa already in the 13th century. Places like Tsari, Labchi and Tise became more and more popular as important pilgrimage centres in the following century.⁴⁹

Francke found a votive inscription on a *maṇi* wall in Bog near Kolang that he ascribes to the time of the Kulu king Bhirkhyim Singh between 1790–1810 CE (Tobdan and Dorje 2008: 118, 150, n. 140). Its lines illustrate both the unique features of Lahul's topography that have attracted and inspired Tibetans pilgrims for centuries, as well as the recreation and reinvention of sacred space by relocating important sites of the *pīṭha* system to the local landscape (translation in excerpts by Francke undated: 15):

Lahoul is a grand place, an august house, the place of fairies!
 The mountain Gandhala is a place (like) Gaya. The glorious
 Bell-mountain arose on a wonderful foundation. It is a place
 blessed by all the Buddhas. The white glacier looks like dKar-
 tirtsi [Tise]. The three united mountains look like Labphyi
 [Labchi] the grand place. The three rivers together look like
 the glorious Chubar. All is perfect like rTsari rtsagong [Tsari].
 [...] The country is of different types, like India and Tibet put
 together [...].

⁴⁹For a detailed description of the pilgrimage to and around Labchi, Tsari and Tise see Huber 1996 and Huber 1999a.

Abbreviations

WHA V Western Himalaya Archive Vienna, Department of Art History, Univ. of Vienna.

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