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John Harrison

## Kings' Castles and Sacred Squares

### The Founding of Lo Monthang

In vain ... shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of the relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past.

(Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1978)

Travellers to Upper Mustang follow the old Kali Gandaki trade route which used to carry grain from India and salt from Tibet. From its source on the Tibetan plateau the river has cut its way southwards straight through the main Himalayan chain between the 8000 metre peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri on its way to the Gangetic plain. The road follows the river through the gorge and then climbs into a tortured landscape of eroded rocks and bare sweeping hills. Ruined castles crown the hills, dense village clusters grow from their tiny irrigated oases of barley and buckwheat fields, and *chörten* tentatively claim the earth for man and his gods.

Beyond Tsarang the road rises towards 4000 metres until suddenly, rounding a corner, the walled town of Lo Monthang appears ahead. It is a sight which has impressed travellers ever since the first Westerners reached Lo after the opening of Nepal in 1950 - Tucci in 1952, Hagen and Tichy, Peissel in 1964, and now up to a thousand trekkers

and researchers each year since the government opened Upper Mustang to tourism in 1992.

The town stands in the barley fields which slope gently eastwards to the Kali Gandaki gorge. Immediately to the north is a deep gully with a tributary flowing from the western hills, and beyond there are castle ruins on two nearby hills. More ruins and abandoned fields lie on the slopes below. To the east another ruined fort or settlement overlooks the Kali Gandaki, and across the river is the cave system of Mardzong.

The surrounding wall is the most striking feature of the town, a 6-metre high rammed-earth structure with square corner and intermediate towers forming an L-shaped rectangular enclosure. The single gatehouse (although there is now also a recent opening in the south wall) stands in the north-east angle of the L. The first distant view of Lo Monthang also reveals three large buildings rising above the walls and the tightly-packed houses within: the white palace, and the two red temples, Jampa Lhakhang and Thubchen Lhakhang. The town gateway opens against the blank north wall of the royal palace, a massive five-storey block of a building, although with a more broken plan-form than comparable structures such as the Tsarang palace and the Big House in Dzar, or indeed the early-seventeenth-century Leh palace in Ladakh. The palace entrance is on the east side, facing the small main square where the masked dances of the Tenchi festival take place. The entrance takes the form of a four-storey timber gallery, with cornices, and carved Tibetan columns on the two lower floors.

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*Lo Monthang in Mustang, Nepal:  
View from the north towards the walled  
city, photograph Jaroslav Poncar,  
August 1997*





The two upper floors have a simple wooden frame infill, but these also were originally more richly decorated, as they have been rebuilt after a collapse of this corner of the building (Tucci 1956: fig. 3).

The two temples lie to the west and behind the palace, reached only by winding alleyways tunnelling under houses. All three buildings are entered from the east, so that the front of Jampa Lhakhang faces the rear of the palace. There is no obvious formal relationship between the monuments, nor indeed any formal planning within the town, although the buildings are approximately aligned with the walls. The temples, and the two lines of monumental *chörten*, are discovered accidentally, hidden amongst the enveloping houses. The very informal character of the streets, turning around the houses, narrowing

and widening into small local gathering places, suggests that the residential development of the town was a completely unplanned process, gradually filling the space available inside the walls and between the monuments. Historically there was a height restriction, so that the majority of houses are two storeys high, and only noble families were permitted to build three storeys.

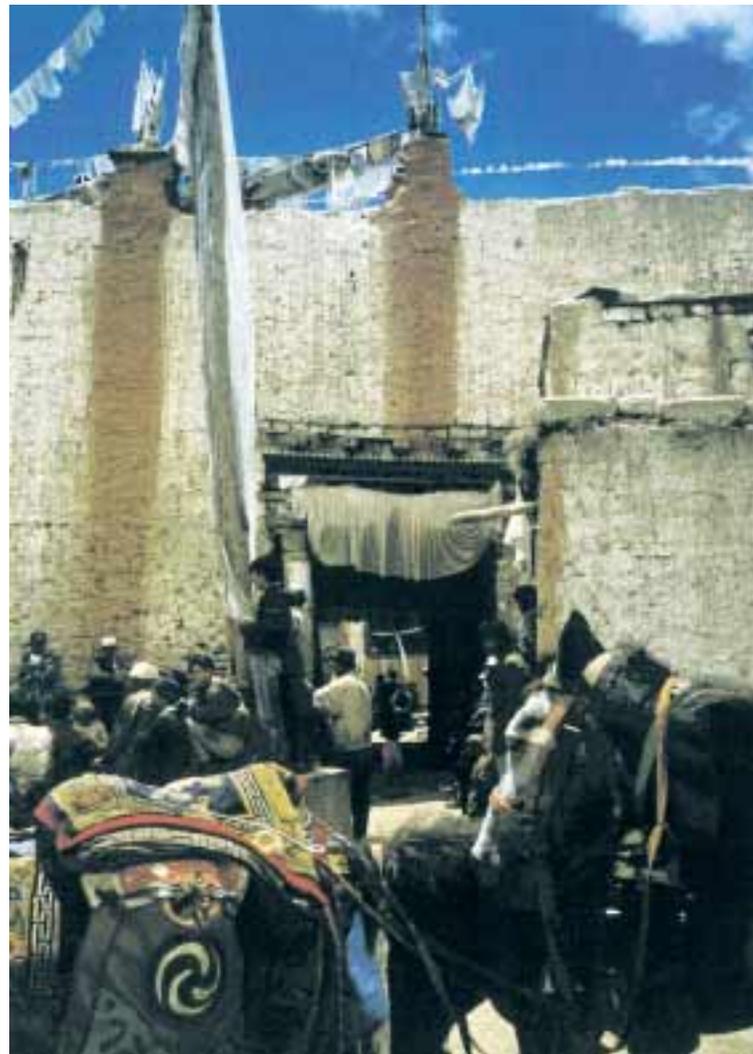
We will return to look at the principal monuments later; having taken a brief look at the town as it stands today, we will now consider what is known of its origins and how the specific urban form may have come about.

The early history of Lo before the fifteenth century has to be seen in the context of the wider region of Western Tibet, Ngari. Jackson and

*Lo Monthang*

*Left: town wall and entrance gateway*

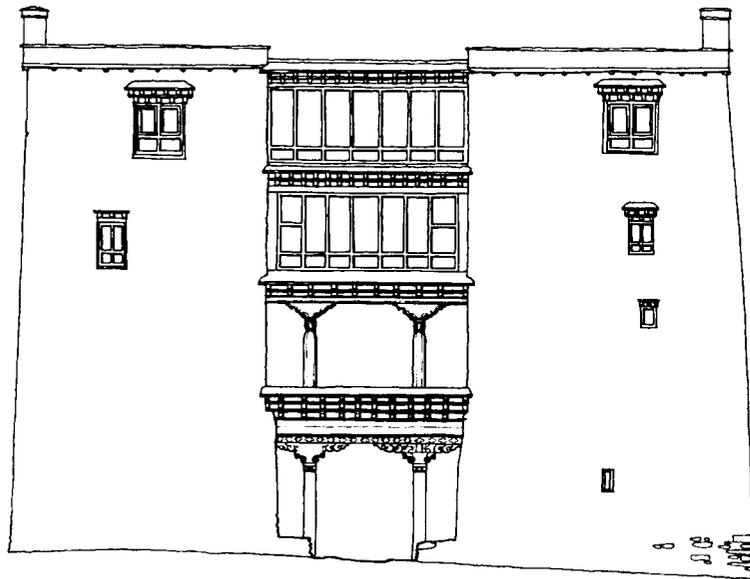
*Right: entrance to the royal palace,  
photograph Jaroslav Poncar,  
August 1997*



<sup>1</sup> For the historical material on Mustang I have drawn principally on Vitali 1994, 1996 and 1997, and Jackson 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, with reference also to Tucci 1953,-56, and Dowman 1997.

Vitali<sup>1</sup> have described the constant struggle between the different players, as first one gained power, then another.

To the north-east of Lo was Gungthang, with its fortress capital at Dzongkha. The kings of Gungthang were closely allied to the monastery and Khon family of Sakya, further to the east, and to Shalu. Sakya in turn had the support of the Mongols, who in the early-thirteenth century led by Genghis Khan had swept through Central Asia and in 1280 established the Yuan Dynasty in China. But the decline of Sakya in the fourteenth century allowed local principalities such as Lo and Guge to re-emerge as independent powers (Vitali 1996: 501). To the west of Lo were the kingdoms of Guge and Purang, and Ladakh still further west. In Jumla, in the west of present-day Nepal,



*Lo Monthang: eastern entrance facade to the royal palace*

the Khasa Mallas had taken over the kingdom of Yatshe in the early fourteenth century, and moved on to control Lo. A Gungthang general, Sherab Lama, recaptured Upper and Lower Lo from the Mallas in the late-fourteenth century, and his son Chokyongbum retook Purang from Guge. The king of Gungthang, according to one version of the story, then made Sherab Lama ruler of Lo as a reward (Jackson 1978: 214). From its strategic position on a major north-south trade route the new dynasty quickly established itself as a regional power in eastern Ngari. During the reign of Amepal, the grandson of Sherab Lama, Lo came to control Purang in the west, and pushed south down the Kali Gandaki, although remaining nominally a part of the

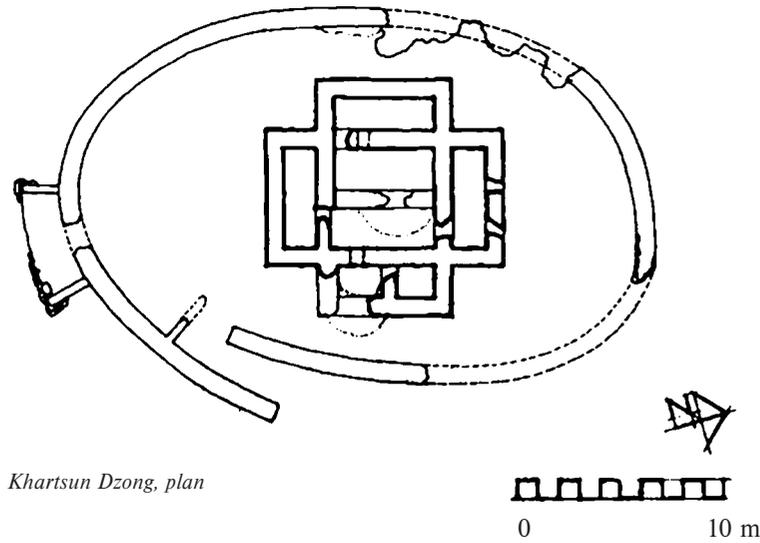


Gungthang empire. In the 1440s Amepal's son, Agon Sangpo, overcame Gungthang itself<sup>2</sup> to make Lo the dominant power in Western Tibet, a position it retained throughout the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth. Lo controlled east-west as well as north-south trade routes, and the wealth this generated was used to build the new town of Lo Monthang.

Before Lo Monthang was built, Amepal's base, according to local histories (Jackson 1984: 146), was the castle of Khaco on the hill to the north. The rammed-earth walls are now too eroded to determine the original form, but Peissel recounts the legend that Amepal had first built the fort square, until a powerful neighbouring chief objected to a corner pointing at his own building and bringing evil to bear on it. Amepal then built a larger fort with a circular wall (Peissel 1992: 161). The smaller, lower fort on the adjoining hill, Khartsun Dzong, which may be contemporary (or a later observation post with its slit windows angled to the north and the north-east pass), is better-preserved, and has a striking cruciform tower inside a spiralling circular wall. Somewhat similar – a square keep surrounded by curved outer walls – is the ruined castle of Tri above Trenkar village in the north-west valley of Tshonub. Higher on the same ridge there are the ruins of an even larger building, perhaps a monastery, but again surrounded by a curving wall and ditch. Yet more castles stand on the

*Lo Monthang: between chörten and high walls of rammed earth*

<sup>2</sup> Vitali 1996: 484. The early kings of Lo are eulogised in the local histories as patrons of Buddhism, but they were also ruthless warlords who took over the waning power of the Gungthang kings in the north and east, extending their territory down the Kali Gandaki to the south and far to the west in Purang and Guge. While Agon Sangpo was building Jampa Lhakhang and employing the Newar artist Devananda to paint its exquisite *maṇḍala* murals for his spiritual adviser Ngorchen, he tricked and assassinated the leaders of the western nomads, the Tsothowa; and in the reign of Trashigon a religious teacher visiting Lo Monthang in 1481 was greeted by the severed heads of Guge soldiers decorating the town gateway (Vitali 1996: 485, 532).



*Khartsun Dzong, plan*

*Khatsun Dzong (left) north of Lo Monthang and Amepal's castle on the higher hill (right)*



hilltops in the north-east valley of Tshosher. All these castles were probably the seats of independent local chieftains before the ascendancy of Lo<sup>3</sup>; once their allegiance was secured they would be retained to guard the trade routes and protect village agricultural production.<sup>4</sup> The hilltop forts in Upper Mustang, and Jiwakhar further north<sup>5</sup>, became the outer defences for Lo Monthang itself. Amepal took religious vows in 1427 (Vitali 1996: 488, n. 824), and his son Agon Sangpo became king. He must have felt confident of the strength of Lo, because in 1441 he moved the royal residence from the hilltop fortress to a new palace on the open plain below. Vitali (Vitali 1994: 1) points out that the building is described as a castle, *gyalkhab*, rather than a palace, *phodrang*, and so it may originally have had a different form; but even today there is only one entrance, and windows high in the sheer four-storey walls. Nevertheless it was a remarkable move, and one can think of no other royal residence built on such a topographically exposed site. Everywhere in the Tibetan

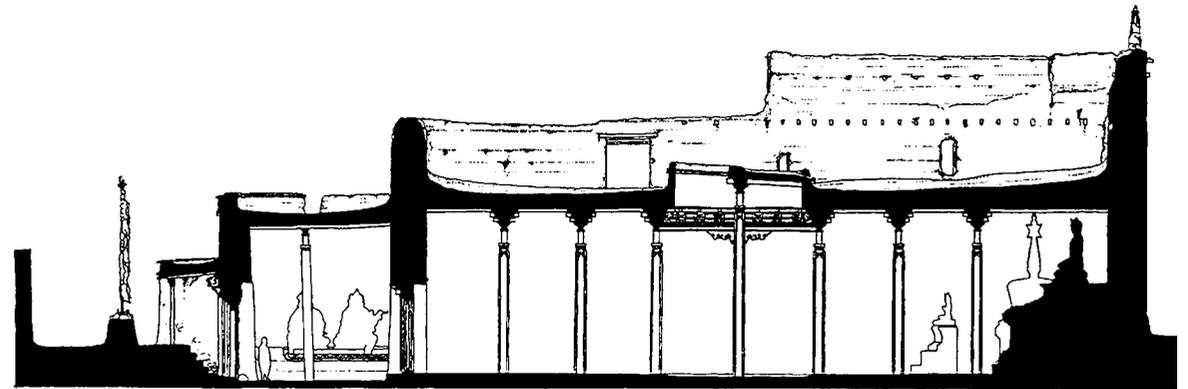
3 Although a century earlier, at the height of its power, Gungthang had built forts throughout its territory, as far south as Muktinath in Lower Lo (Jackson 1976: 45).

4 Seeber has traced the network of forts in Lower Mustang, distinguishing the different functions of the local refuge, the small observation tower, the major castle, and the trade control point (Seeber 1994: 81-87).

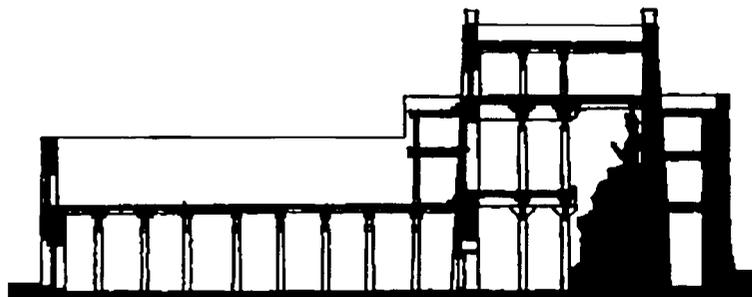
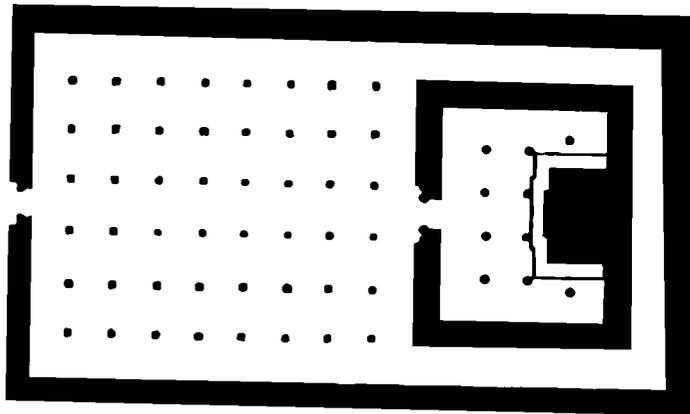
5 Vitali (1994: 2) suggests that this may have been the military capital of Lo.

world defensive hilltop sites are chosen: comparable palaces such as Leh and the Potala stand on crags, even if they are not primarily fortresses like Gyantse and Shigatse.

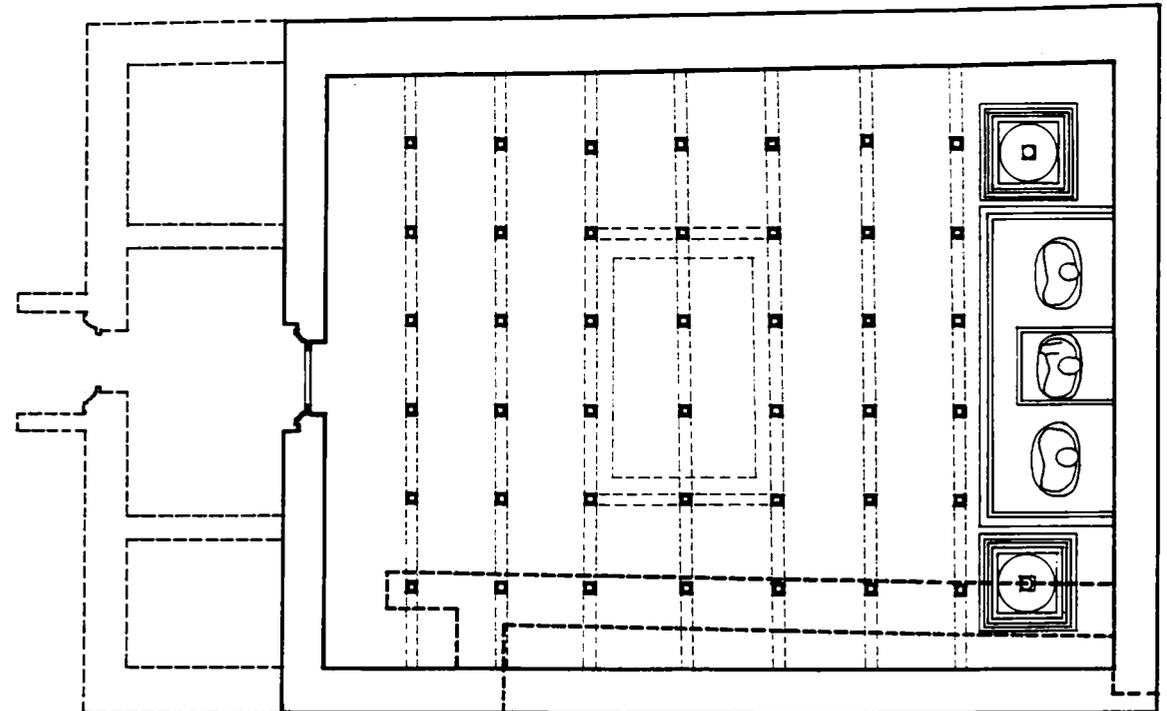
Shortly after the completion of the palace, Agon Sangpo built Jampa Lhakhang immediately to the west. The core of Jampa Lhakhang is the central tower containing the two-storey statue of Maitreya, with the *maṅdalas* on the upper floor painted by Newar artists, closely related in style to the Gyantse Kumbum paintings (Dowman 1996: 186 ff.). The cella was surrounded on three levels by circumambulatory passageways; the surviving ground floor passage still retains some original paintings. The top floor *maṅdala* chapel of the tower was added in 1498, which explains the change in building construction from rammed-earth below to mud brick. The present entrance courtyard, with its jumble of re-used and reassembled columns, may have been a covered assembly hall (*dukhang*), with first-floor rooms around the sides and front of the building.



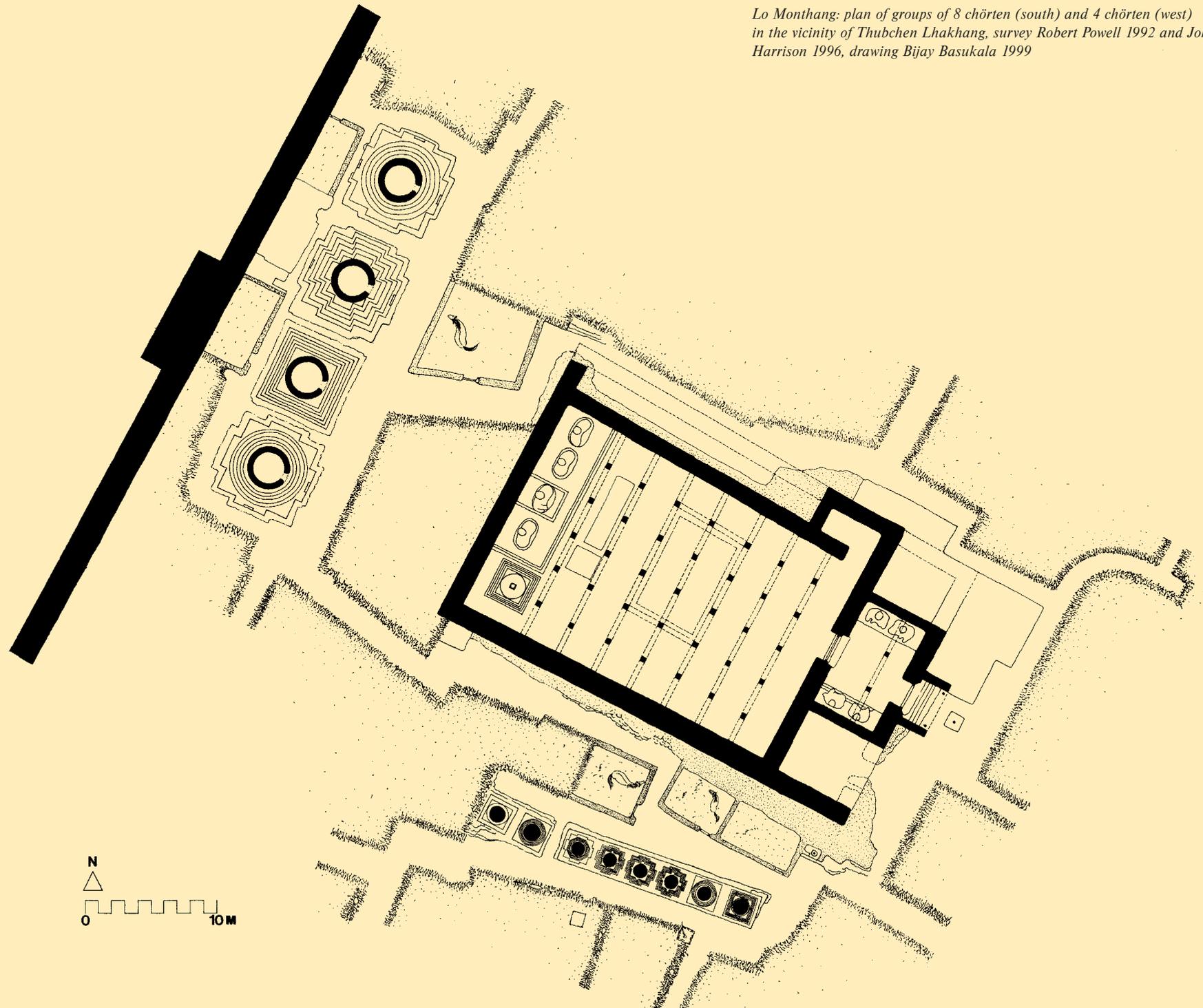
*Lo Monthang: Thubchen Lhakhang, suggested original plan (below) showing later alterations in broken line, and section (above) of the condition in 1992*



*Lo Monthang: Jampa Lhakhang, suggested original plan (above) and section looking south*



*Lo Monthang: plan of groups of 8 chörten (south) and 4 chörten (west) in the vicinity of Thubchen Lhakhang, survey Robert Powell 1992 and John Harrison 1996, drawing Bijay Basukala 1999*

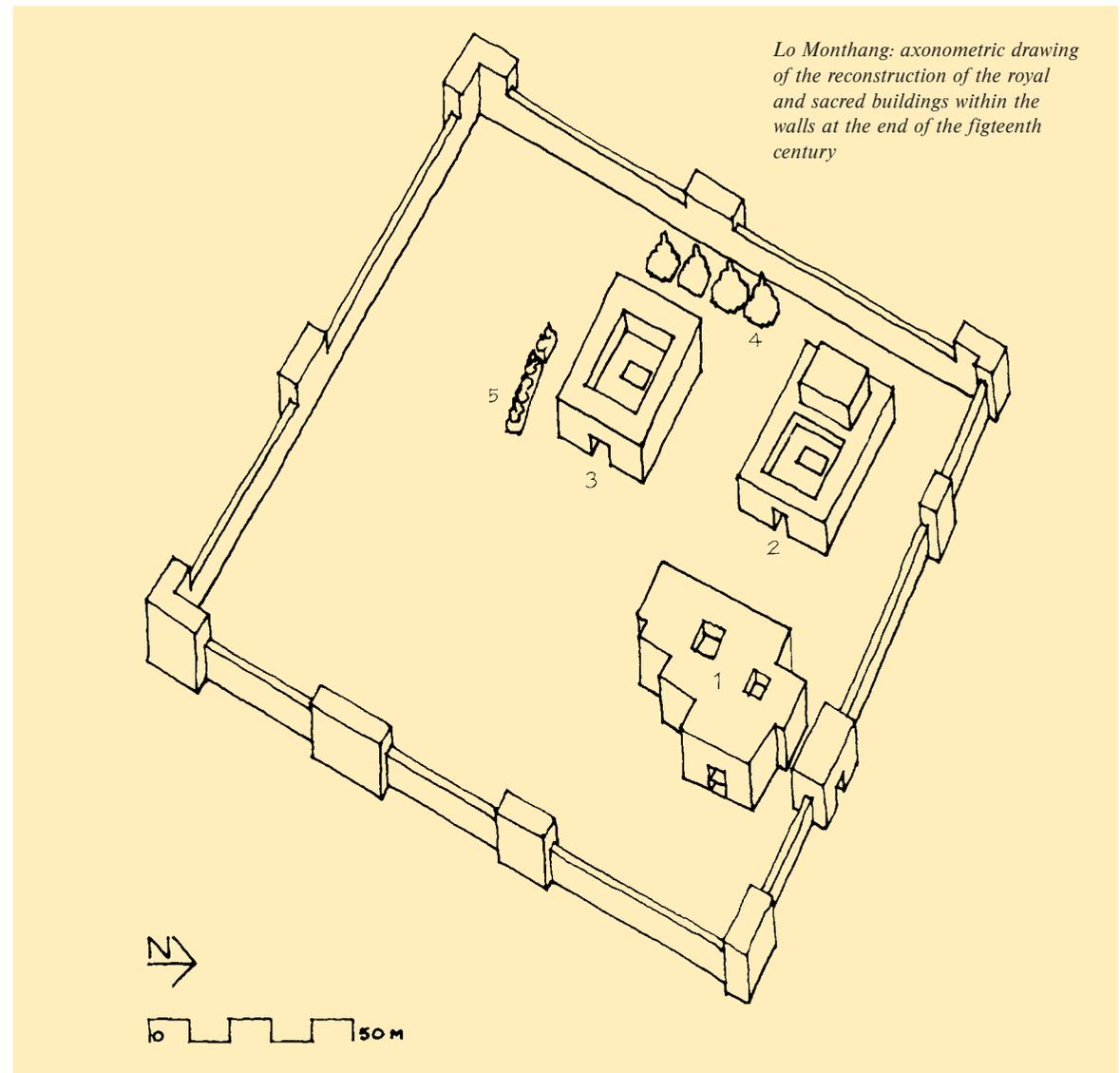


The temple and the colossal Maitreya statue were consecrated by Ngorchen Kunga Sangpo, the foremost religious teacher of the day, during his third and final visit to Lo in 1447-48. Ngorchen (1382-1457) had established the Ngor sect of the Sakya school and founded Ngor Ewam Chode monastery south of Shigatse in 1429. He was intimately involved in the decoration of Gyantse Kumbum between 1427 and 1436. He seems to have had a close relationship as spiritual adviser with both Amepal and Agon Sangpo, travelling to Lo in 1427, 1436 and 1447.<sup>6</sup> Inscriptions in Jampa Lhakhang describe Amepal and Agon Sangpo as patrons of Ngorchen and the building. Although there is no documentary reference to Amepal after 1440, it is quite possible that he was still involved in the construction of Jampa Lhakhang together with his son and Ngorchen. And what role did Ngorchen play? If he devised the *maṇḍala* cycle on the first floor and brought Newar painters from Gyantse to execute the work, perhaps he planned the building itself, and was instrumental in the creation of the massive temple next to the royal palace, even in the conception of the new town.

We do not know what other buildings may have stood around the palace and the temple in those first years: there is no documentary evidence and no archaeological investigation has yet taken place in Lo Monthang. It is most likely that the wall - or a wall - was erected at the same time, to protect the two monuments and their ancillary buildings. If the wall was built in the 1440s, then the king must have envisaged a town, or a building complex, of some size from the beginning. But the space within the walls was not immediately filled with houses, because twenty-five years later, in 1472, a second huge temple was built to the south of Jampa Lhakhang.

Thubchen Lhakhang was a single assembly hall spanned by seven beams, each supported by six tall columns. Even in its present state of decay, with one bay lost on the north and the wall-paintings crumbling, it is a magnificent space. The present entrance hall containing the four large Guardians is a later addition, but the original building had certainly one and possibly two floors of accommodation on the roof, giving a much higher profile and a mass that must have equalled Jampa Lhakhang. Thubchen Lhakhang was built by king Trashigon, the son of Agon Sangpo, and completed by 1472, when a religious council was held in the building (Vitali 1994: 10). The close association with Ngor was maintained after Ngorchen's death - Agon Sangpo with the third abbot and Trashigon with the fourth - and continued throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Jackson 1980: 134).

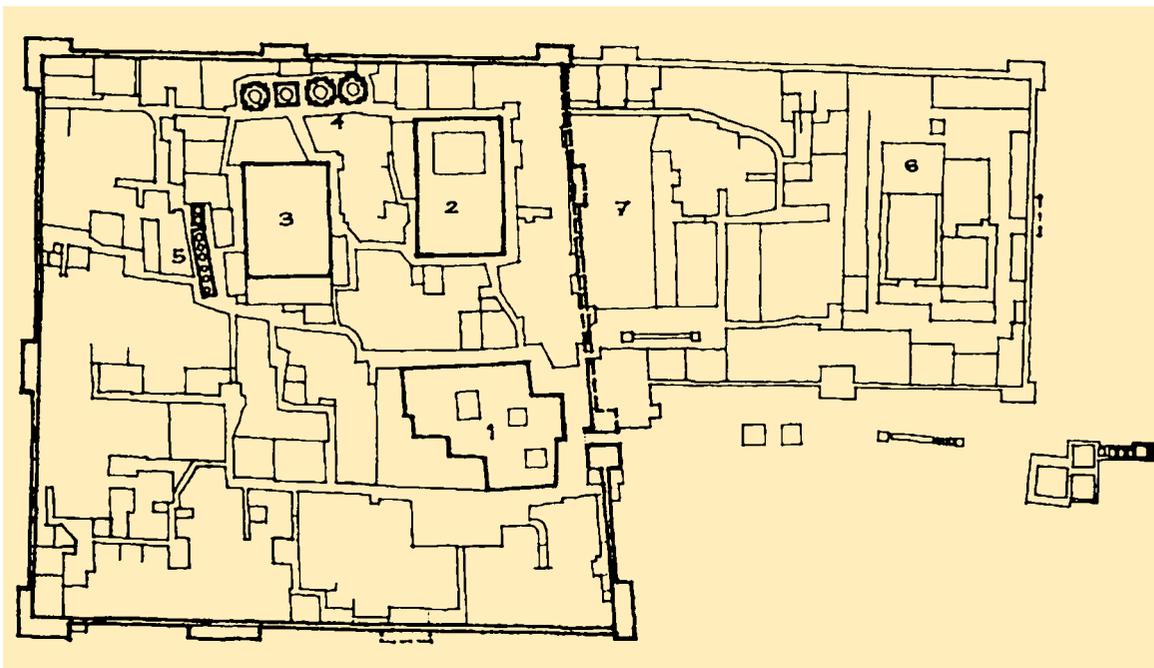
The two groups of *chörtens* to the south and west of Thubchen Lha-



*Lo Monthang: axonometric drawing of the reconstruction of the royal walls and sacred buildings within the walls at the end of the fifteenth century*

khang may be contemporaneous, defining a circumambulatory path around the temple. I think that they were built before the surrounding houses, which later occupied the vacant ground. If the houses had been built first it is unlikely that there would have been sufficient space left for the *chörtens* to be squeezed in between. It suggests that the space around the two temples was conceived with the same monumentality as the buildings, very different from the present congested character of the town. The southern *chörtens* are a canonical group of eight, conforming almost exactly to the pattern books (Pema Dorjee 1996). The four large western *chörtens* are more problematical. Were

<sup>6</sup> These are Jackson's dates (Jackson 1978: 216 n. 77, 218; Jackson 1984: 42 n. 6); Dowman (1997), who refers to Jackson as well as transcriptions of the wall-painting inscriptions in Champa Lhakhang, has earlier dates for Ngorchen's involvement in Lo: 1415, 1424, 1435 for Ngorchen's three visits to Lo; 1424-35 for the construction of Jampa Lhakhang; and the death of Ngorchen in 1444.



*Lo Monthang: plan with suggested original line of walls before the construction of Chöde Gompa in 1710, based on sketch plans by M. Peissel, 1963, D. Barlow, 1993, mapping by R. Kostka 1996, site measurements by N. Gutschow, 1992, Robert Powell and John Harrison 1992 and 1996 (not a fully-measured survey).*  
 1 royal palace, 2 Jampa Lhakhang, 3 Thubchen Lhakhang, 4 four chörten, 5 eight chörten, 6 Chöde Gompa, 7 monastery field

there originally eight, perhaps stretching to the north to link Thubchen with Jampa Lhakhang? or were eight planned and only four built? The sequence of the four does not follow the canonical ordering, as one would expect the fourth *chörten* to be a Great Miracle, *chotrul*, or a Descent from Heaven, *lhabab*, whereas it is a Victory, *namgyal*. A photograph taken by Tucci in 1952 (Tucci, 1953: ill. 28) shows these *chörten* in a ruinous state, so it is possible that they may have been altered during reconstruction.

So by the end of the fifteenth century the town had taken on the form which we can still trace today. There is documentary evidence for the palace and the two temples; the *chörten* groups may have been built; and the wall was most probably there, but enclosing a smaller area. If we look at the plan of Lo Monthang, the northern leg of the L is occupied by the Chode gompa, which was not built until 1710. South of the monastery and adjacent houses there is a large open area of gardens, bounded to the south by the backs of the houses which face onto Jampa Lhakhang. This unbroken line of buildings continues the line of the north gateway wall, incorporates a large block of older rammed-earth masonry at one point, and meets the western town wall at a square tower. It suggests that the original town was square in plan, each side some 105 metres (108 paces?) in length, with corner towers and one or two intermediate towers. The geometrical expectations aroused by the overall form are not, however, carried through in

the detail. The entrance gateway is not, if it is in its original position, in the centre of the north wall, the other intermediate towers are not symmetrically disposed, and the buildings within are not related in a formal manner to each other. The orientation of the monuments varies slightly from that of the walls, and the walls are orientated 30 degrees east of north.<sup>7</sup> But although the project is incomplete in its implementation, what led to the adoption of this ideal form, the square?

The Hindu *Vāstusāstras* contain very precise rules for the design of cities, mostly with a square plan and a formal and symmetrical arrangement of walls, streets and temples. These ideas had reached the Kathmandu Valley with the Indian Malla kings, and were given an early expression in the reconstruction of Patan on a cruciform plan after its destruction by Muslim invaders in 1347 (Pieper 1975: 52–69). Concepts of formal planning were therefore current in Central Nepal, and could have found their way northward with traders and pilgrims, but the cultural contact between Lo and the south was tenuous. Trade took place through a series of intermediaries, with the principal entrepot well to the south in Thak Khola. Lo was part of the Tibetan world, and much more direct influences reached it from the north. A number of precedents for the formal square in architecture and city planning present themselves.

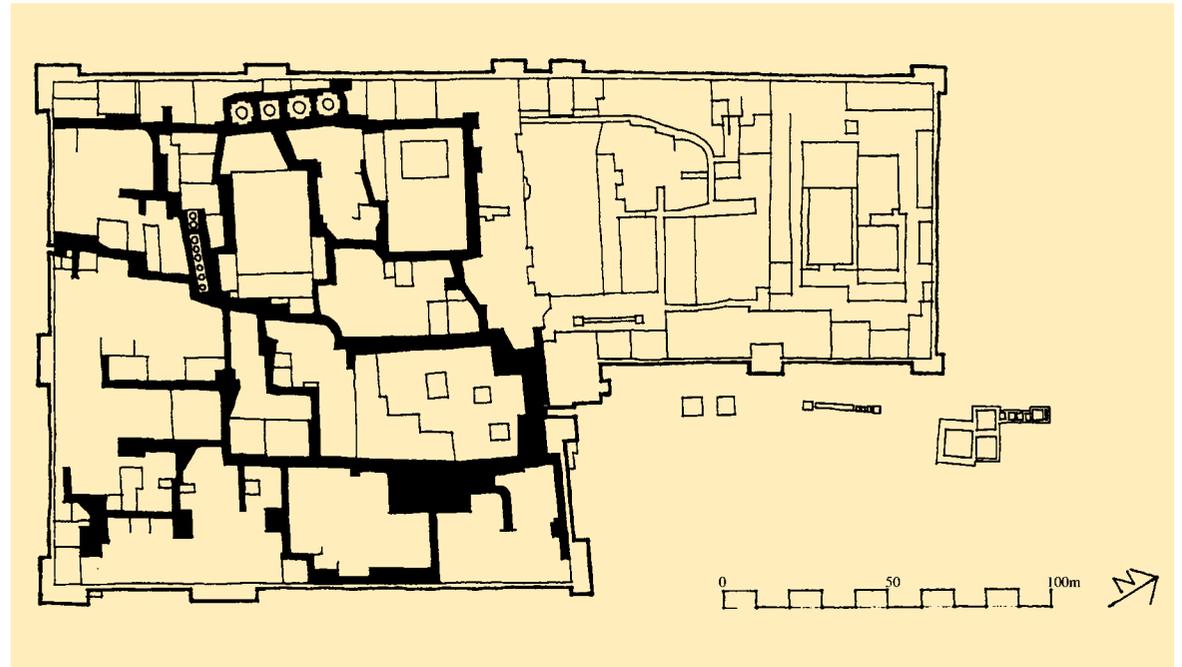
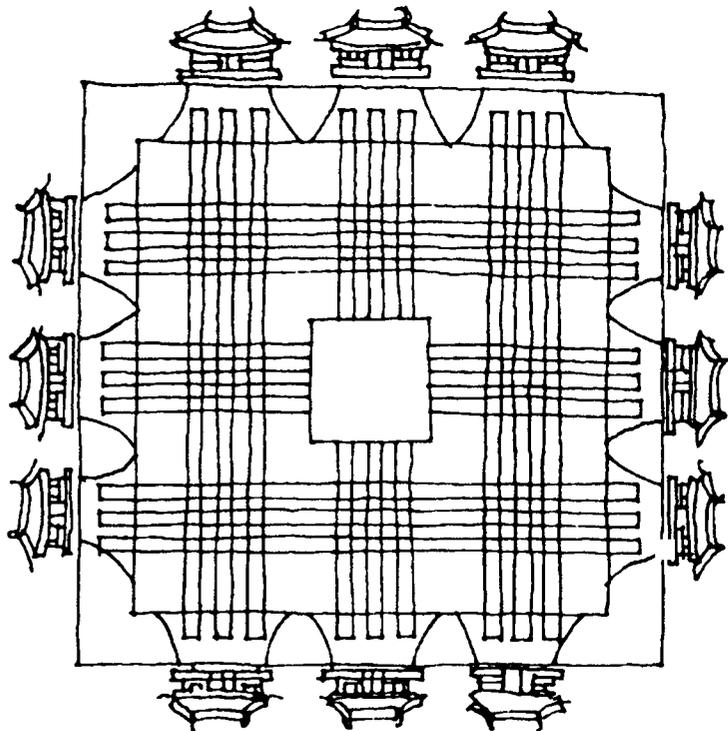
In China, courtyard houses and layouts on a central axis began to appear during the Zhou Dynasty, 1122–255 BC (Bussagli 1989: 64; Schinz 1996). This approach to urban planning was theoretically developed in the Zhou Li, which defined an ideal capital city, square in plan, with three gates on each side, nine cross-streets in each direction, and an ordered disposition of temples, altars, courts and markets. The plan was designed to accommodate what the ruler saw as an ideal society: calm, ordered and organized in a rigid hierarchy focused on the emperor. In the Han and later dynasties towns and cities throughout the empire were built on these principles, with grid-iron plans and square surrounding walls.

In the two centuries before the founding of Lo Monthang there had been an unusual degree of cultural and political interplay between Tibet and China, brought about by the strange relationship which Tibet, and Sakya in particular, had developed with the Mongols while they were conquering and then ruling China (Snellgrove & Richardson 1968: 148 ff.). The Mongols themselves had built settlements with square defensive walls before they reached China. These were still nomad encampments, with only temples and the palace built within the protective wall, surrounded by the tents of the tribes and clans, even at their capital Karakorum of 1218 (Schinz 1996: 268, 284). In this respect

<sup>7</sup> But is orientation to the cardinal points as important in Tibetan architecture as it is in the *Vāstusāstras*? Sani gompa in Zanskar is a highly geometrical *maṇḍala* plan, with its principal axes at 45 degrees from the cardinal points.

the Mongols resembled the Tibetan nomads who, according to Tucci and ancient Chinese sources (Tucci 1973: 64), led a pastoral and nomadic existence without fixed settlements, but surrounded their tents with a protective wall, *ra*, which later developed into the 'iron wall', *cagri*, around temples and monasteries. When Kublai Khan, the first emperor of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, built his capital Dadu at Beijing in 1266, he sought to legitimise his rule by returning to the classical prescriptions of Zhou Li, using the system of holy numbers for dimensions and sub-divisions, and a layout on the 'magic square' principle. But beneath this superficial adoption of traditional forms, the Yuan was "an exploitative and very simple despotic tyranny that used architecture to demonstrate power" (Schinz 1996: 288 ff.).

That same demonstration of power can be seen in the new monastery-fortress which the Mongol client, the Sakya, built in 1268. The South Monastery at Sakya consists of a large central temple block and subsidiary buildings surrounded by massive walls with square corner towers and one central tower on each side. It is an appropriate symbol for the Khon rulers of Sakya, "the clan in whose hands earthly authority and the prestige of religious sanctity are united" (Tucci 1949: 7). For in addition to the military architecture of the Yuan, Sakya draws upon the Buddhist archetypes of the *vihāra* and the *maṇḍala*.



The square assembly space and surrounding cells of the *vihāra* had developed at an early stage of Buddhist architecture in India, from the cave temples of Ajanta and Sanchi, and Nalanda, through Gandhara to Kashmir. In Nepal the *vihāra* influenced the courtyard monastery, and in Tibet the original form of temples such as the Lhasa Jokhang and Shalu, where the central space onto which the chapels opened was later roofed over to create a *dükhang*.

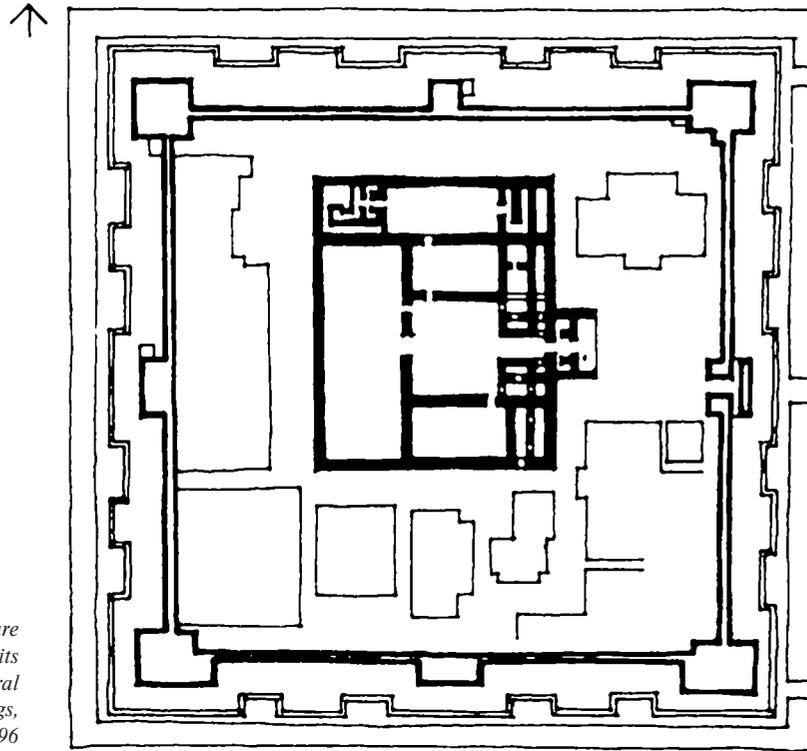
The *vihāra* is one form of the *maṇḍala*, the meditative diagram of the cosmos which informs all Tibetan art and architecture, and indeed the whole of Tibetan life. We see elsewhere in this volume how the wider landscape is interpreted as a *maṇḍala* form, but in architecture the cosmic diagram is given concrete reality as a building to be occupied by man and the gods. Samye is said to be the first Tibetan monastery, and there the square central temple, set on a flat plain, is surrounded by secondary temples and a circular wall, very precisely set out as a geometrical design orientated to the cardinal points. The circular wall reappears at Shalu and at Drathang, but we also find large square enclosures such as Nenyng, and notably Sakya.

From Sakya we return, like Ngorchen, to Lo Monthang.<sup>8</sup> There are the same defensive walls and towers, but enclosing now a densely-populated town instead of a monastery. A Tibetan monastic centre could be laid out as a *maṇḍala*, but Tibetan towns take on a much more organic form. There is a lack of formalism which reflects the

Above: Lo Monthang: informal street pattern within the walls

Left: Chinese diagram of the square ideal city. After: Schinz 1996, fig. 2.3.1.7

<sup>8</sup> And on the road from Sakya to Lo Monthang lies Dzongkha, the capital of neighbouring Gungthang at the time of Lo's rise to power. At the Heidelberg conference Hildegard Diemberger drew our attention to ruined walls and buildings at Dzongkha which are remarkably like Lo Monthang. At the time of writing I have not been able to obtain further information, nor yet to visit Dzongkha itself.



*Sakya South Monastery: the square maṇḍala plan of the monastery with its massive ramparts that enclose a central temple and residential buildings, founded in 1268. After: Su Bai 1996*

lack of social or professional demarcation (Meyer & Jest 1987: 192), in contrast to the highly ritualised society of China. Lhasa developed organically along the Barkor round the Jokhang temple; and although

the area in front of the Potala has a towered rectilinear wall like Sakya, the buildings within were quite informally grouped. But in Lo Monthang we saw that there may at one time have been more space around the monuments, and that open space has gradually been encroached upon by houses. How much village housing was there in the early town? Did the local population at first remain in the old settlements nearby while only the king and the clergy moved into the new town? The size of the temples suggests a religious community of considerable size: was it all housed in the now-missing rooftop accommodation, or did the monks occupy other parts of the town? Did the founding of the new Chode gompa in 1710 lead to the decline of Jampa and Thubchen Lhakhangs and the evolution of a completely secular village?

And finally - why was Lo Monthang built? The great wall and towers speak of defence, but the existing castle on the hill was a much more logical defensive position. Lo Monthang was a ceremonial centre, a symbol of the king's power, his ability at the height of the kingdom's expansion to leave his castle. The king adopted the forms of Sakya and the Mongols to state his invincibility, but his creation was not just a secular palace. The temple built for Ngorchen equalled the palace in size and exceeded it in riches, and the second temple followed less than a generation later.

Perhaps the Lo kings, like Kublai Khan building the Zhou Li at Dadu, sought to legitimise their regime by proclaiming themselves the protectors of Buddhism; or perhaps it really was Ngorchen, claiming the new land for Ngor Sakya.