

Amandus Vanquaille and Hilde Vets

# Lamayuru

## The Symbolic Architecture of Light

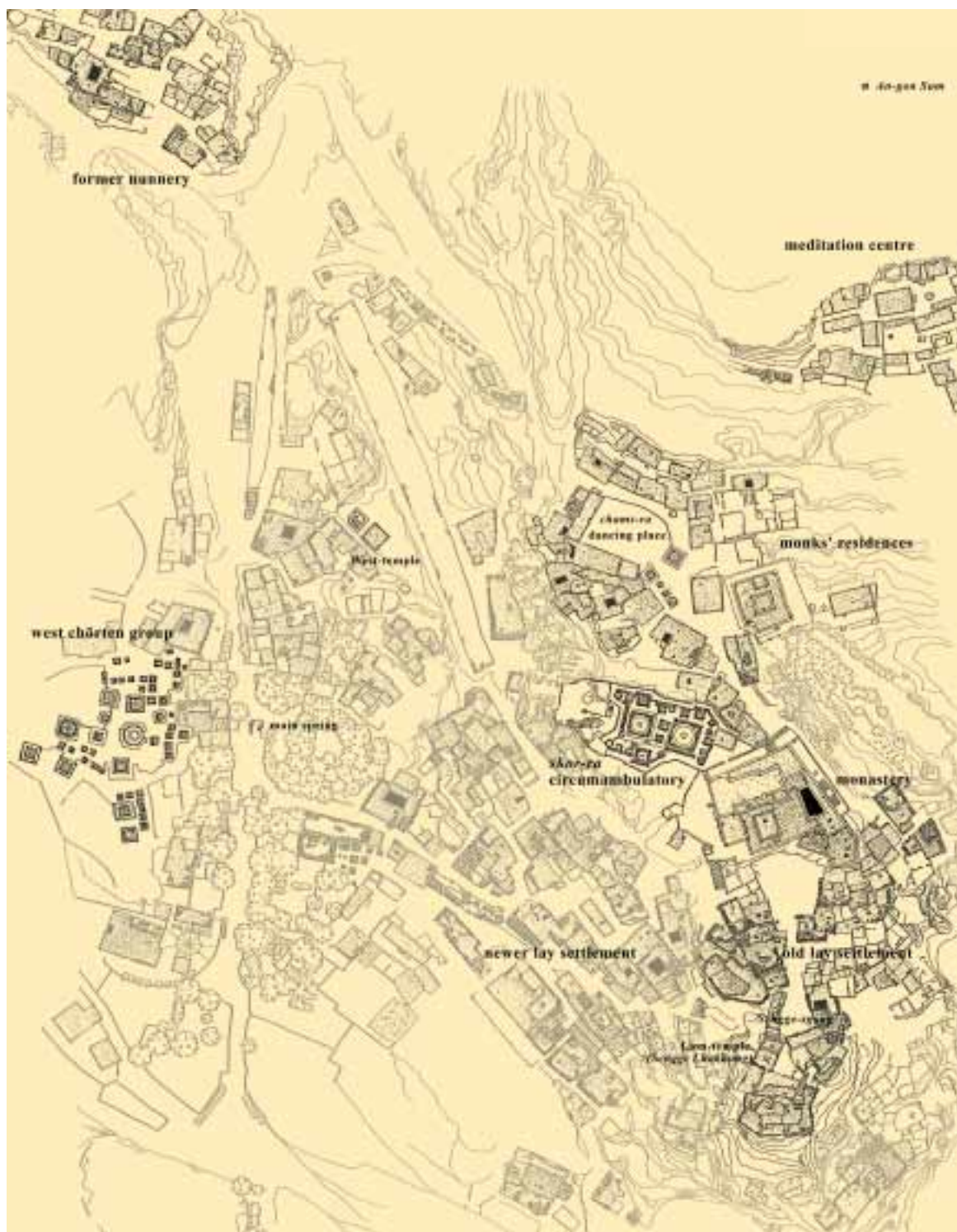
### Introduction: topography

Approaching Lamayuru from the Fotu-la, a 4108 m high pass seven km to the west, the old trail follows the watercourse down through summer pastures until it turns behind a rock massif and opens into a

broad verdant valley. From this dramatic viewpoint, called the Gonkyi-la, where the monastery is suddenly revealed standing high on a crag jutting into the cultivated valley floor, a row of 108 *chörtens* leads the traveller to the sanctuary. The valley, cultivated by irriga-



*Lamayuru: topographical location plan of the village with its surrounding barren mountains and the irrigated fields of the verdant valley along a stretch of 1500 m. The monastery and the village stands on a high crag jutting into the valley floor. From the east, a row of 108 chörtens along the valley leads the traveller to the sanctuary. To the west, the valley drops down into the barren Markalaga, the white sediment of a former lake eroded into bizarre formations.*



tion, bends around the hill of the settlement, and then drops down into the barren Markalaga, the white sediment of a former lake eroded into bizarre formations. From there, the valley narrows again into a deep gorge, leading eastwards some ten kilometres to the conjunction with the Indus near Khaltsi.

Lamayuru consists of four main parts. The centre – the monastery and a circumambulatory path around two colossal *chörtens* – stands on the highest level of the promontory. The monastery itself is built around and now completely encloses a “rock needle”, with the cave where Naropa is said to have meditated.

A little lower, on a plateau to the north-west of the monastery, the monks have their residences (*drashag*) and ritual dancing place or *chamsra*. The original lay settlement is still lower, occupying the ridge to the south of the monastery<sup>1</sup>, with the old Lion Temple (Senge Lhakhang) rising on the southernmost point of the crag.

The meditation centre is a recent addition to the settlement on a higher slope of the promontory, overlooking the monastery.

On the vertical axis, we first have the valley floor (where the animals graze in winter time), then the lay settlement, the monastic community and at the top the meditation centre.<sup>2</sup> On the peak above stands the Angonsum for the main protective gods or *sungma*.

#### Vairocana *maṇḍala*

Lamayuru is, in its urban composition, a choreographic scene that places a certain ideology – that of Buddhism – centre stage. The architectural setting is formed not only by the buildings, but also by nature and common memory.

The monastic centre is built around a needle-shaped rock which is now incorporated into the main temple. As the dark chapels and outbuildings, which form the temple, completely enclose the promontory rock, nothing of this landscaping element can be seen except in the central praying room (*dükhang*). From this room, one of the doors of the bookcase opens into the reputed meditation cave of Naropa<sup>3</sup> and

#### *Lamayuru: site plan.*

*Lamayuru consists of four main parts. The centre – the monastery and a circumambulatory path around two colossal chörtens – stands on the highest level of the promontory. A little lower, on a plateau to the north-west of the monastery, the monks have their residences (drashag) and ritual dancing place or chamsra. The original lay settlement is still lower, occupying the ridge to the south of the monastery, with the old Lion Temple (Senge Lhakhang) rising on the southernmost point of the crag. The meditation centre is a recent addition to the settlement on a higher slope of the promontory, overlooking the monastery.*

*In light gray are indicated the alterations made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

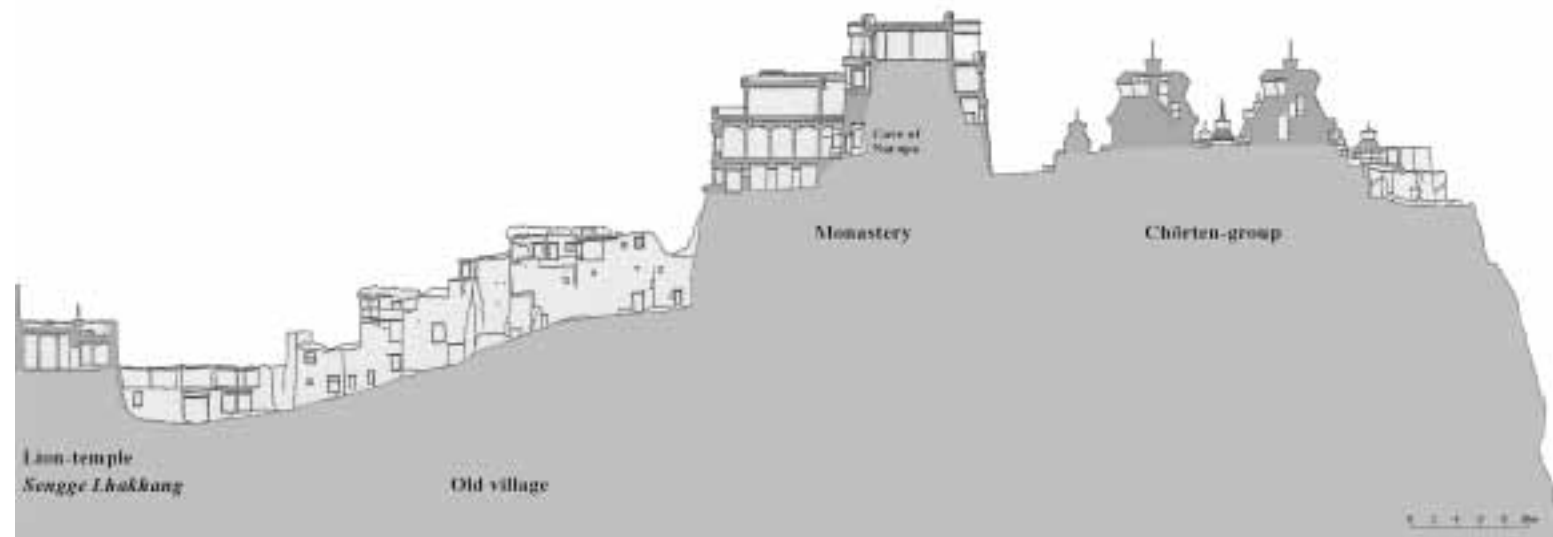


reminds us of the legendary emergence of this site as a Buddhist pilgrimage place. The library represents not only the written record of the Buddhist tradition, but also the specific lineage of the order to which the monastery now belongs and which is mainly transmitted orally. This manner of gaining access to the meditation cave through the library leaves an ingeniously contrived trace of the former landmark, the needle-shaped rock, that once made this site so attractive. That this promontory rock evokes the collective imagination is clear from the fact that people attribute special energy and magical forces to this rock.

The legend of the foundation of Lamayuru – which we found in a version dating from 1862 written by Konchok Randol Nyima Rinpoche<sup>4</sup> and which is now edited with a commentary by Karl-Heinz Everding – provides us with more information. Five temples have been built in Lamayuru: one in the centre and the others in the four cardinal directions. These temples symbolise the five tantric Buddhas and together form an architectural Vairocana *maṇḍala*. The foundation of these temples and of the entrance *chörten* near the spring is attributed to Rinchen Zangpo by local tradition. Rinchen Zangpo was a very prominent figure in the so-called “Second wave of Buddhist Propagation”, and lived from 958 to 1055 A. D. He is not only famous as a translator of Buddhist canonical texts (*lotsawa*) or as a composer of religious hymns, but also as the founder of several monasteries and

temples in the Western Himalayas. He studied in India, principally in Kashmir. The influence of Kashmir is especially significant in the artistic and architectural context. Biographies tell us that he engaged Kashmiri artisans for the fine woodcarving and paintings. While many monasteries and temples are attributed to Rinchen Zangpo, most were probably not actually founded by him. These temples often date from the same period or a little later and are probably built by collaborators or disciples of this famous figure. Not only is the refined style of Kashmir prominent in these constructions, but the typological features of these monasteries or temples also clearly refer to the same period.<sup>5</sup>

The central temple in Lamayuru, the Lion Temple or Senge Lhakhang, is still in existence. A Vairocana *maṇḍala* is painted in this small temple, probably dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Vairocana *maṇḍala* was very popular at that time – such *maṇḍalas* are also to be found in Tabo, Alchi, and other sites in Ladakh. Only part of the western temple remains, badly restored. Remnants of the impressive mural paintings, probably dating from the same period, are badly damaged. Of the east and south temples, whose position was indicated to us by the former *lobon*, only some foundation stones remain. Further archaeological research is required for the correct identification of these two temples. The northern temple is reputed to have been situated on, near or in the needle-shaped rock, at the place



Lamayuru: north-south section through the old part of the village, the monastery and the *chörten* group, showing the needle-shaped rock which is now incorporated into the main temple. The cave of Naropa on the south side of this rock is now accessed from the main prayer hall. The old lay village lays at the lower part of the promontory, with the Lion Temple (Senge Lhakhang) rising on the southernmost point of the crag.

1 Although the upper village has gradually been abandoned and most of the village now lies at the western foot of the crag below the monastery, this is a recent development. Until the *önpo* (the grandfather of the present *önpo*) moved his house down from the hilltop around 1885, the only structures on the valley floor were the long row of *chörten* on the western approach road and the ancient group of “*lotsawa chörten*” near the main spring (*chumig*). A group of houses in a gully a little to the north-west, now an extension of the lower village, was formerly the site of a nunnery built partly in caves.

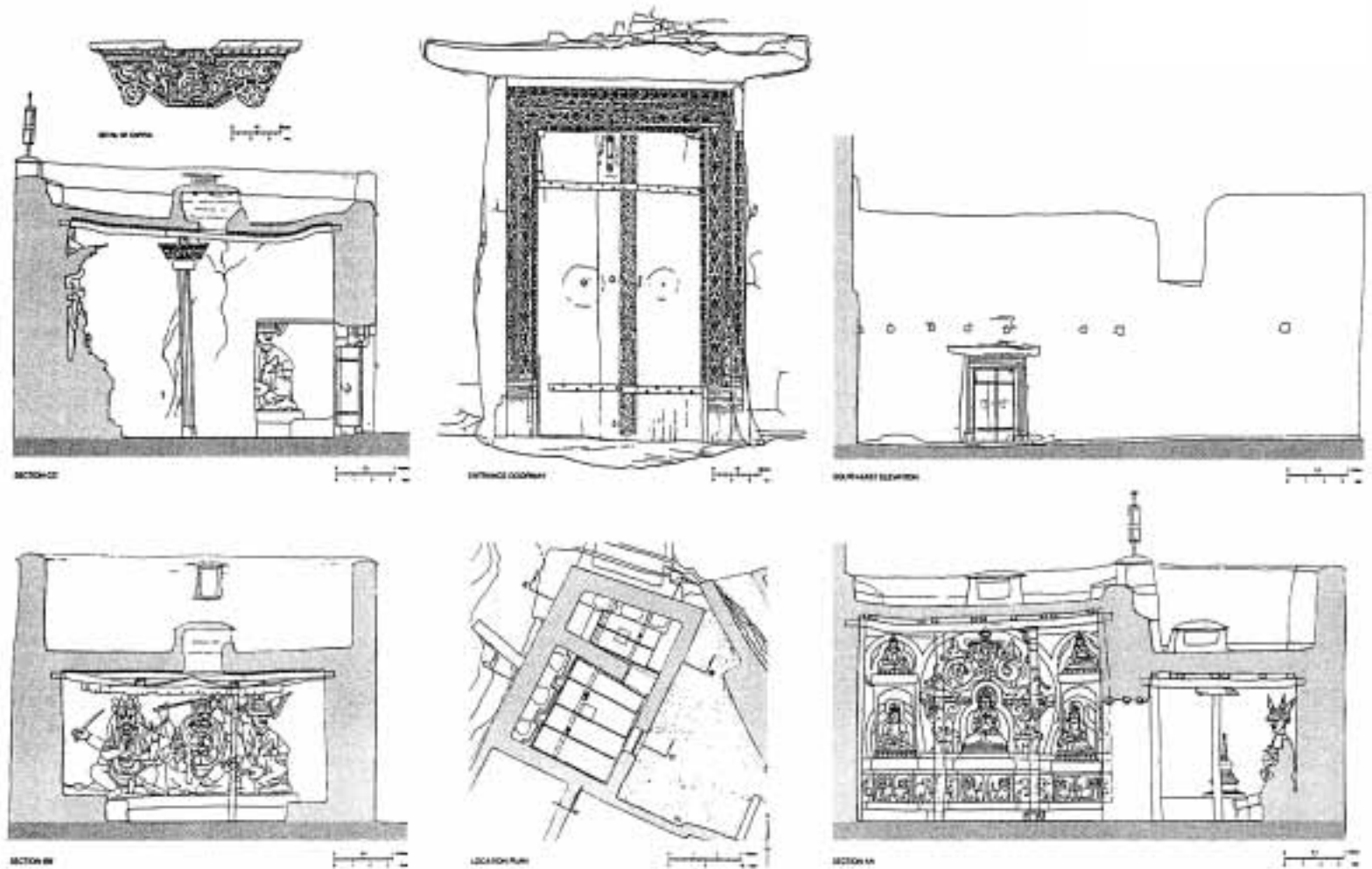
2 This is of very recent construction, established by a Tibetan teacher in 1977.

3 Naropa (956–1040) was an Indian tantrist who is regarded as an important master of the Kagyupa tradition, to which Lamayuru has belonged since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A fuller account of the role of Naropa in Lamayuru has been prepared by Karl-Heinz Everding.

4 This chronicle was written after the various plunderings and the disastrous destruction of Lamayuru by the Dogra army under the leadership of Zorawar Singh. In this war (1834–1842) not only were many monks murdered, but many religious objects and monastic scriptures were destroyed or looted by the Muslim armies. It is principally under the direction of the monk Konchok Randol Nyima that the reconstruction took place. The reincarnation of Konchok Randol Nyima is presently a Rinpoche in Lamayuru.

5 An account of the role of Rinchen Zangpo in Lamayuru has been prepared by Karl-Heinz Everding. See also Tucci 1988; Snellgrove & Skorupski 1977, Vol. 2 Part III (Biography of Rinchen bZang-po).

Lamayuru: plan, sections and details of the Lion Temple, probably dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century or older. The Lion Temple represented, together with four other temples in the four cardinal directions, an architectural maṇḍala. A Vairocana maṇḍala is painted in the central Lion Temple.



6 *dung*: respectful form of the word for bone, bones or remains of a deceased person.

In Ladakh, *dung* may also signify “funerary kiln”: “The Tibetan term used here is simply *dung* and it refers to the *chörten*-like edifice in which the bodies of leading people were (and still are) incinerated. The full term is *dung-khang*. In Ladakh the term *ro-khang* (pronounced *rongkhang*) = ‘corpse-house’ is used” (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: Vol 2: 97 fn. 49; see also p. 34).

During our fieldwork we encountered only the term *dungten*. It is used for any kind of *chörten* containing the funeral remains of a very important person such as a reincarnate *lama*. Very often a *dungten* is associated with *ringshel* or *pheldung* (small balls, resembling small pearls produced by the body during cremation). In Lamayuru, the two large *chörten* were clearly called *dungten* instead of *chörten*. In this case the two large *chörten* would be a *dungten* (reliquaries) for the two legendary lions. This was also confirmed by the present *önpö*.

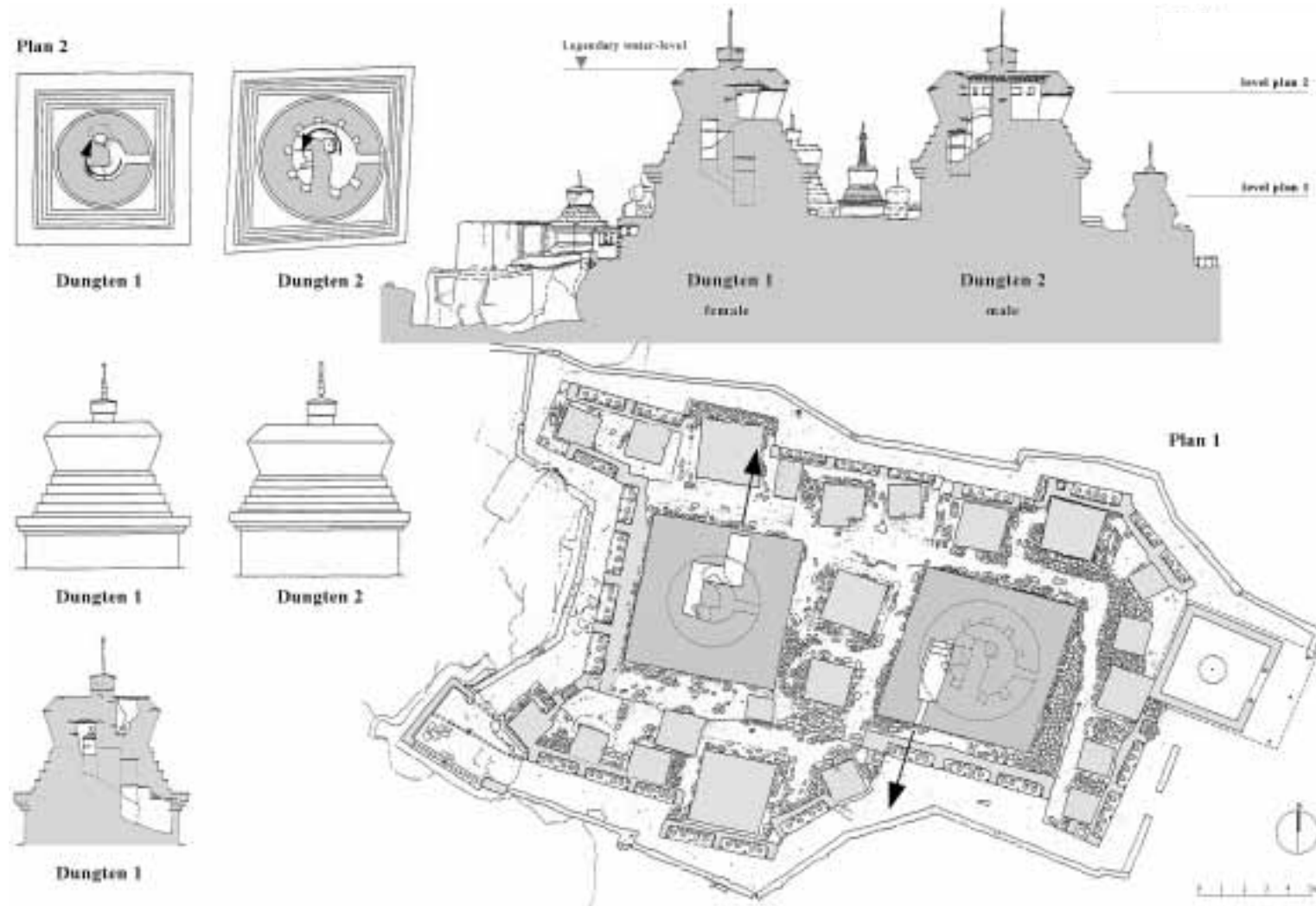
where Naropa is supposed to have meditated, and where the main temple now stands, next to the two big “reliquary *chörten*” (*dungten*).<sup>6</sup> Another version situates the northern temple on the place where Konchok Randol Nyima Rimpoche built a new temple, the Chenrezig Lhakhang, after the destruction of Lamayuru by Zorawar Singh.

Through these five temples, which represent spatially the cosmic pattern of the Five Buddhas, the people could imagine the hallucinations which occur during the *bardo*, the intermediate state between death and rebirth. Similarly, the central temple consists of a “peaceful” room and a “terrifying” room, which represent respectively the first and second week of the *bardo*. By becoming familiar with these representations of hallucinations, the devoted visitor would not become anxious or be attracted to them on the *bardo* itself. This enables one

easier to escape from the “Wheel of Life”. The five temples represent in a permanent way the different manifestations of “absolute Buddhahood”, each stressing a different facet. The architecture of these temples has a pronounced iconographical programme which highlights the Buddhist ideology. The era in which the temples were built was one of religious propaganda, the so-called “second wave of Buddhist propagation” during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Dialectical opposites

Two remarkable ritual objects in the main temple, kept in a dark and nearly inaccessible small room at the needle-shaped rock, provide new material which may better inform us about the establishment of



*Lamayuru: plan and section of the circumambulatory space (skora) with the so-called “male and female” reliquary chörten. The male one appears broad and fat (dungten 2), the female fine and slim (dungten 1). The horizontal sections (plans) of the domes may be seen as phallic representations. In dungten 1 a staircase leads downwards in a clockwise direction. In dungten 2 a similar staircase leads downwards in a counterclockwise direction. In dungten 1 the staircase leads to a small corridor, down inside the cube-shaped throne (generally called the “Lion’s Throne”), pointing towards the lhatho above the northern hill. In dungten 2 this corridor is facing the top of the Dongri, the “Face Mountain”, south of Lamayuru.*

Lamayuru. These two objects are made of wood and are not unlike small obelisks, tapering towards the top. There is an arrow on the top-most plane. Ritual texts titled “north”, “east”, “south” and “west” are written on the four sides. Interestingly, these four cardinal directions are marked clockwise on the first object and counterclockwise on the second. Confusion about the direction is excluded because the object clearly has a base and a top: the cardinal directions are definitely indicated in a counterclockwise direction. This object, with the cardinal directions anticlockwise, was lying on the ground, apparently thrown down from the altar. The first object, with the cardinal points in the normal direction, stood on the altar which is on the western side of the needle-shaped rock. These objects are probably connected with the symbolic establishment and orientation of this site, the expulsion

of evil and devilish spirits, and the creation of a new, peaceful world – a ritual of the *önpo*. Why does the second object, with the counterclockwise points of the compass, lie down on the ground as if driven from the altar, while the first is still standing upright on the altar? Would the mark of the counterclockwise directions symbolise the original autochthonous religion? Did Buddhism replace a former religious centre here?<sup>7</sup> The secular dances of the lay people of Lamayuru, which exceptionally in Ladakh circle around in the counterclockwise direction, raise the possibility that Buddhism replaced an earlier belief system. The direction of the secular dances is based on the story of two lions referred to in the foundation legend of Lamayuru: by dancing in a clockwise direction, the people would be symbolically throwing themselves into the mouths of the lions. For the secular

<sup>7</sup> This question is open to discussion and is referred to by many researchers including, among others, Francke, Cunningham, Biasutti-Dainelli, Tucci and Petech.



*Lamayuru: the monastery and neighbouring circumambulatory space, with Dongri mountain and the snow-covered Wanlari behind. According to local legends, Lamayuru must be protected from the “peeping glance” of the Wanlari. The lhato of the protective deities on the roof of the monastery is built exactly on the place from where the Wanlari can be first seen behind the Dongri-pass.*

*Wanlari behind. According to local legends, Lamayuru must be protected from the “peeping glance” of the Wanlari. The lhato of the protective deities on the roof of the monastery is built exactly on the place from where the Wanlari can be first seen behind the Dongri-pass.*



8 Only in Lamayuru and Temisgang, a village belonging to the monastery of Lamayuru, the lay people dance in the counterclockwise direction. In all the other villages of Ladakh, people dance in the clockwise direction.

9 See also comments by Karl-Heinz Everding, which will be published later.

10 The *yungdrung* or *svastikā* is an important symbol of the Bon religion. However, this element in the foundation legend is not sufficient in itself to establish that Lamayuru was formerly a Bon centre.

11 The *chotar* at the Sengesgang indicates, according to the people of Lamayuru, the precise place where the lions were found. The male lion was lying at the side of the entrance gate, the female lion at the side of Sengeskhanga.

12 In the iconographical representations of Indian Buddhism, Vairocana is seated on a lion throne.

dances, the people insist on following the local legends instead of the clockwise direction of circumambulation, introduced by Buddhism as the opposite to the local belief systems.<sup>8</sup> According to the above-mentioned foundation legend, the valley of Lamayuru was once filled by a lake. This lake was drained by the miraculous powers of a holy *arhat*, Nyima Gungpa, after offerings (*chutor*) to the *nāga*.<sup>9</sup> From the middle of the lake, two lions appeared. The grains of the *chutor* offering were driven by the waves into the pattern of a *svastikā* (*yungdrung*), and the sprouts began to blossom according to the shape of this symbol.<sup>10</sup> It is these two legendary lions which are believed by the local people to be found at the Lion Ridge (*Sengesgang*)<sup>11</sup>, and of which the ritual remains (*ringshel/pungpa*) are buried under the two

big *dungten* near the needle-shaped rock. Is it on this holy place, the Lion Ridge, where the designers had planned the central Lion Temple of Vairocana<sup>12</sup> to free the people from fear and – as they saw it – superstition? This cannot be stated with certainty. Further historical, archaeological and anthropological research needs to be carried out to reveal more about the different belief systems in Lamayuru.

#### Architecture and landscape

The eastern side of the standing object is directed towards the two big reliquary *chörten* under which the legendary lions are supposed to be buried. The east is conventionally the most important direction.



*Lamayuru and the circle of white sediments, called Markalaga, as seen from the Fotu pass*

These two *dungten* are also interconnected by local tradition with the complicated network of foundation legends.<sup>13</sup> It is remarkable that two opposite directions are also conceived in these *dungten*. In *dungten* 1 a staircase, accessible from the opening in the dome, leads downwards in a clockwise direction. In *dungten* 2 a similar staircase leads downwards in a counterclockwise direction. In *dungten* 1 the staircase leads to a small corridor, down inside the cube-shaped throne (generally called the “Lion’s Throne”), pointing towards the *lhatho* above the northern hill. In *dungten* 2 this corridor is facing the top of the Dongri, the “Face Mountain”, south of Lamayuru.

The former *lobon* refers to male and female *chörten*, recognisable in the form of the *chörten*: the male one being broad and fat, the female

being fine and slim. The domes of both *dungten* are of equal height. Initially these reliquary *chörten* do not seem to conform with certain conventions of the proportional systems present in Ladakh.<sup>14</sup> The male *dungten* is the reliquary *chörten* of the male lion, the female *dungten* the one of the female lion. The horizontal sections (plans) of the domes may be seen as phallic or vulvar representations. If indeed these symbols were consciously conceived, we are dealing here with a ritual observed during the construction of the *dungten*. At the time of construction, these symbolic drawings could be clearly read. We do not know exactly what kind of ritual was involved. It refers again to Kashmir, and to an era where clear symbolism defined the plans.<sup>15</sup> The construction method of the *dungten* refers to the same early

13 According to the local legends, these *dungten* were not conceived by Rinchen Zangpo. Together with the village they are considered older than the temples.

14 For a study of the different proportional systems, based on written sources and a survey in Upper Ladakh (the area around Leh, Spituk until Hemis), see Pema Dorjee 1996. Pema Dorjee also makes a distinction between the “early *stüpa*” and the “later *stüpa*”. By “early *stüpa*” he means *stüpas* which were constructed before the 14<sup>th</sup> century, or at least those which were not clearly influenced by the proportional systems cited by him which were implemented during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

15 In the early Buddhist style of Ladakh, Zanskar and Spiti which is still strongly influenced by Kashmir and India, the architectural (horizontal) plan as symbol is prominent (e. g. the *maṇḍala*): cf. Tabo, Alchi, Wanla and Lamayuru. As far as we could ascertain, the “terrace-formed” monasteries, where the symbolism in the plans becomes less prominent, date only from the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century.





*Lamayuru, 7 July 1994: the first minutes of the summer morning sun rising over the village rock. The shadow-line defines the border of the built area.*

Buddhist period (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century). The projecting parts and spans of the early Buddhist *chörten* are constructed with small wooden beams which are placed next to each other. This method of construction is also used in Tabo. It is only in later constructions that the projecting parts are replaced by corbelled stone slabs. Unlike in Kashmir, timber is very scarce and expensive in Ladakh. All small *chörten* around the two big *dungten* are of more recent date.

According to local tradition, the horizontal top of the domes of these *dungten* indicates the level of the former lake. Visually it is level with the horizontal line of the landscape formed by white lake sediments (*markalaga*). The summit of the needle-shaped rock in the main temple, next to the *dungten*, protrudes about one metre above the former water level. The top of this needle-rock, where the *zimchung* of the head *rimpoche* is now situated, would have been – according to the people and the former *lobon* – the island where the grains of the *chutor* blossomed miraculously in the form of a swastika. Whether all these connections were really made by the monk-designers is not important in this context; what is crucial is that local tradition connects the architecture with the sacred landscape. The two *dungten* are not only linked to the legend of the two lions which appeared after the draining of the lake by the *arhat*, but also to the landscape itself: the white sediments of Markalaga and the mountains around Lamayuru.

#### Symbolic architecture of light

It is this ingenious way of incorporating the legendary tales, the “memoria” of this pilgrimage place and the natural setting into the architecture which fascinates the architect. In their choreography, the master builders have mounted a monastic scene where the use of light makes a spectacle of the temples, *chörten* and *lhatho*, in direct contrast with the village. In this non-industrial culture, the light source is the sun itself. The sunrise and sunset turn the site into a theatrical scene and stress the main parts: the *lhatho* (Angonsum) on top of the village, the old part of the village, the main temple complex, the central Lion Temple and Wanlari.<sup>16</sup> The secular village is still in the morning shadow when the *lhatho* is first illuminated. Then the monastery and the lay village are highlighted, with a definite borderline between the houses and the hillside. No houses are built under this shadow-line, which is clearly delineated for one minute in the morning. This phenomenon, where the shadowline defined in the first minutes of the summer morning sun is the border of the built area, is frequently found in Ladakh. Even in the summer villages, the houses are built where the sun first strikes. This cannot be wholly explained by the desire for warmth, as such a location enjoys this advantage for only a matter of minutes. It seems rather to have a psychological dimension: people seek borderlines, even if formed only by sunlight.

<sup>16</sup> Wanlari is the most important mountain in the area around Lamayuru. The lay people believe that the Angonsum, the *lhatho* on top of the village protects them against this mountain which, according to them, “peeps from behind the other mountains like a thief”. It is this mountain to the south of Lamayuru which retains its snow-covering longest. It is particularly striking when its snow-covering is illuminated by the last rays of the sun, while the rest of the valley is in darkness.





Lamayuru, 27 June 1995: the *lhatho* at the right side of the pictures is first illuminated by the summer morning sun

The sacredness of the sanctuary is also orchestrated in the light of the evening: the same *lhatho* on top of Lamayuru, the monastery/*chörten*-group and finally the Lion Temple are highlighted at sunset. The rest of the valley floor is already completely in shadow. These observations were made in the period around the summer solstice: for several weeks around June 21, the light effects did not change. As in a real theatrical production, the light slowly fades out in turn on the *lhatho*, the *chörten*-group and the main temple. At the end, only the red facade of the Lion Temple and the Migsman<sup>17</sup>, the name of the rock on which the temple is built, is illuminated.<sup>18</sup> This site, the *Sengegang*, which receives the last evening sun, is a ritual centre. This is apparent during the procession on the fourth day of the ritual dances (*chams*) of the monks, who halt here before proceeding towards the cremation place to the west of Lamayuru.

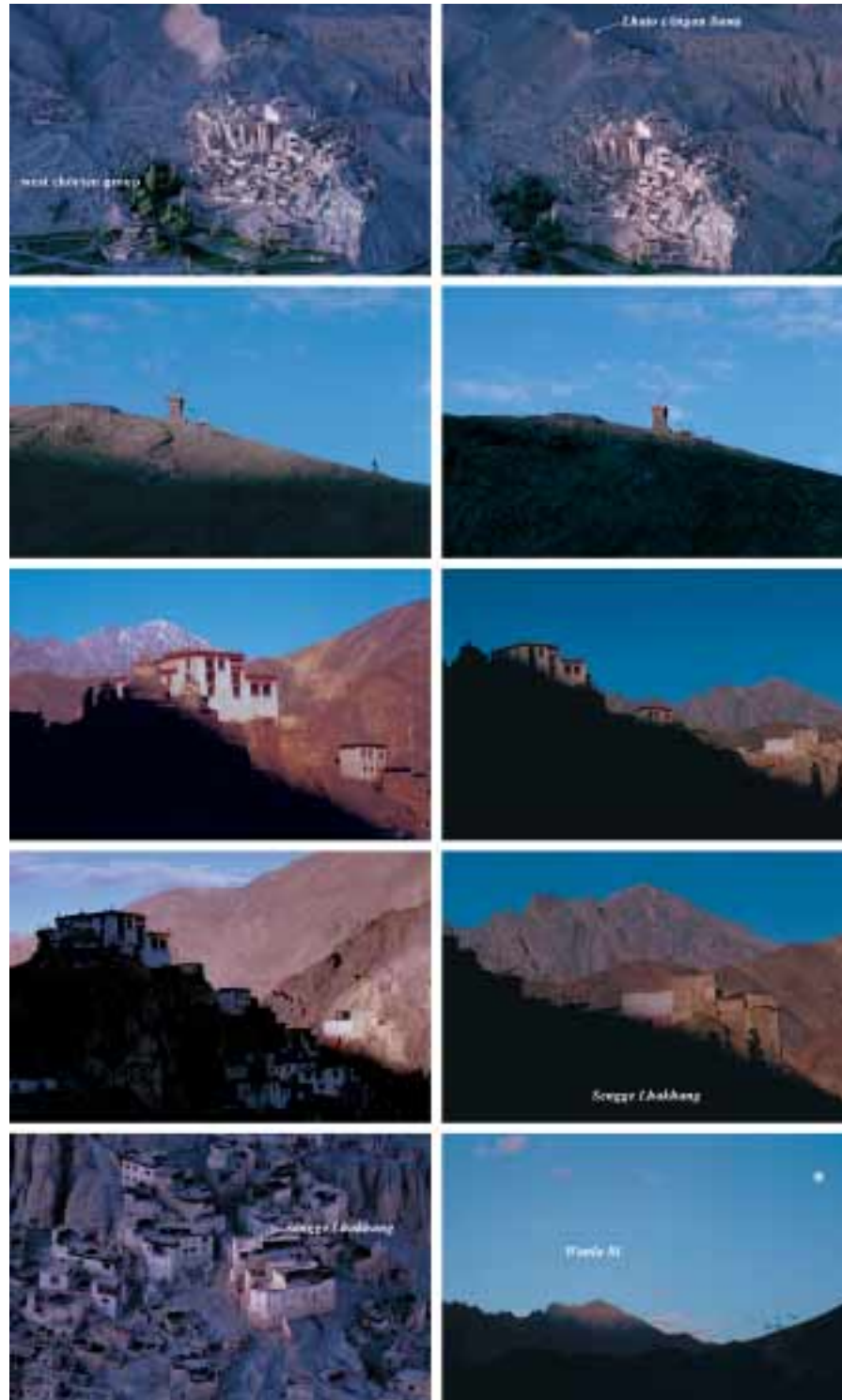
### Conclusion

The late-Buddhist culture of Kashmir, which strongly influenced Ladakh, even before the time of Rinchen Zangpo, was not unacquainted with sun worship. The most prominent example is the Sun Temple of Märtāṇḍa erected at Lalitapura (Kashmir), by Lalitāditya in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The sun cult was widespread in Kashmir (Naudou 1980: 72) and was probably influenced by Buddhist refugees from the Iranian frontiers and from Central Asia, who were driven from their monasteries by the rapidly advancing Islamic culture. The refugees were allowed to remain in these countries which were well-disposed towards Buddhism, such as Kashmir. It was during this period of mass migrations and real eclecticism when the Buddhist culture of Kashmir influenced the culture and architecture of Ladakh. Ladakh

<sup>17</sup> “Migsman” is in fact the name of a game like “chess”. In Lamayuru this name is used for this rock because the villagers play chess on this particular place. According to the *önpo*, it is also from this place that the observation towards the sun gate (*nyitho*) has to be made.

<sup>18</sup> Also the house behind the Lion Temple, called Lardzepa, is placed in the last spotlight of the sun. The villagers told us that this house was once belonging to the *lönpo* (a kind of minister). But further indications for this we did not find.

*Lamayuru, 28 June 1995: the light of the summer sunset slowly fades out in turn on the lhato, the chörten-group and the main temple. The Lion Temple receives the last evening sun.*



was even subordinate to Lalitāditya-Muktāpīḍa (c. 725–756): “Ladakh must surely have been subject to him, and thus it is to the 8<sup>th</sup> and subsequent centuries that we may attribute the Buddhist rock-reliefs, which represent the most important traces of pre-Tibetan, i. e. direct Indian Buddhist influence in Ladakh” (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977, vol. I:6). The Blue Annals contain an account of the solar ritual established by Ravigupta<sup>19</sup>, which was observed until at least the year 1000. Two collaborators of Rinchen Zangpo figure in this account.<sup>20</sup> It is evident, therefore, that the Buddhists in Ladakh, Zanskar and Spiti were familiar with the solar cult when Lamayuru was founded as a Buddhist centre. The period in which Lamayuru was reformed and planned as a Buddhist site was one of symbolism. This is manifest not least in the architecture, which has a clear symbolic character with an iconographical programme. The theatrical dimension is strengthened by relating the architecture to the natural landscape, the local legends and the movements of the sun. The play of light and the correlation with the summer solstice is not an isolated case in Tibetan-Ladakhi culture; it was also mastered in Kashmir, India, Persia and other regions. Lamayuru is an illustration of how a landscape is sanctified in an architectural manner by the control of light, the enshrining of the origin and the architectural expression of the “memoria” of the site.

<sup>19</sup> Ravigupta means “protected by the Sun”.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of this account, see Naudou 1980: 73.