

## A Cultural Crossroads: Some “Foreign” Elements in the Art and Architecture of mNga’ ris

In most of my previous works I have dealt with the eclectic nature of the Indo-Tibetan style in the art and architecture of mNga’ ris.<sup>1</sup>

Indo-Tibetan style occupies a place of great interest in the whole Tibetan art history owing mainly to a couple of factors. Firstly, it attracts attention for its intrinsic beauty, being a marvellous blend of Indian patterns, symbolism, iconography and styles that meets with the Tibetan volumetric shapes, colours and building materials. Secondly, the study of this style can prove useful in the daunting effort to date the Western Himalayan monasteries, temples and *mchod rten*, since, whereas the literary and epigraphic sources are scarce, this early style can be found in almost all the sites ascribable to the Second Diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*), approximately 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century, an epoch during which the Indian influences were deeply felt. The early Buddhist monuments, scattered across the mNga’ ris territories,<sup>2</sup> therefore appear to be connected through common artistic features.

<sup>1</sup> The majority of the research was carried on during the biennial scholarship as research affiliate at the Jawaharlal Nehru University of New Delhi, and later during my research doctorate and post-doctoral studies and field research. The missions, in the framework of the Joint Research Project between the Chair of History of Oriental Art at the Genoa University (Prof. Paola Mortari Vergara Caffarelli) and the National Museum of Oriental Art ‘Giuseppe Tucci’ (MNAO) in Rome (Dr Donatella Mazzeo), were developed with the collaboration of Dr Massimiliano A. Polichetti of the MNAO. The research projects were approved by the Ministry of Human Resource Development of India and partially co-sponsored by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR) of Italy. The outcome of the researches has been published in several articles, see for instance: Di Mattia 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b.

<sup>2</sup> For the correspondence of mNga’ ris in contemporary geography, see for example Di Mattia 2010a: 104.

The purpose of the present article consists in a groundwork assemblage of the outcome of preceding art-historical research works, corroborated by more recent studies and some new considerations of mine, in order to systematise a sort of scheme which, far from being exhaustive, rather awaits further learned opinions and enrichment. In this way the possible omissions and discrepancies may be removed and the grid’s eventual gaps may be filled by adding new elements and fresh remarks. This process could advance the study of the development and evolution of Tibetan art and architecture, delineating a picture more complete and comprehensive, which in turn might contribute to reconstructing the history and cultural atmosphere of the times.

The method followed lies in outlining the historical context first, then the artistic features will be organically arranged, gradually proceeding from the external shapes towards to the artistic details, from the plan to the architecture and its components.

### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, during the *bstan pa phyi dar*, the Western Himalayan areas, culturally heterogeneous and on the periphery of Greater Tibet (*bod chen po*), were transformed into centres of learning and political power.

In any case, the area was already a contact zone, exposed to the cross-cultural influences of the Persian, Indian and Central Asian civilizations, for it was traversed by southern branches of the ancient Silk Route, linking northern India and Central Asia. Consequently, a complex range of interactions developed in the region, since the

connecting roads would have played a significant role in the cultural exchanges during the formative phase of the Western Himalayan kingdoms.

It is possible to hypothesise that, along the beaten paths for caravans, merchants and Buddhist, Bönpo, Hindu and Jain pilgrims, on their way to the holy Kailāsa mountain,<sup>3</sup> as well as artists and explorers, travelling side by side, fostered a reciprocal exchange of ideas. We can imagine that these people, gathering about the fire in the quiet of the night bivouac, debated regarding their own philosophic visions, perhaps giving rise also to some sort of syncretic cults, an eclectic religiousness blending various kinds of doctrines.

The collapse of the Yar lung monarchy led to the migration of a branch of the royal family, headed by sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon (a descendant of Glang dar ma, the last king of Greater Tibet, died in 842),<sup>4</sup> towards the sTod mNga' ris, the "High Dominion" or the "Western Dominion".<sup>5</sup> The history of Tibetan monarchy started again on the bank of Manasarovar lake,<sup>6</sup> at the foot of Kailāsa, a location that was the epicentre of the ancient Zhang chung kingdom<sup>7</sup> and would become a new centre of political power. Here sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon built the castle of sKu mkhar Nyi bzung, his capital city,<sup>8</sup> founding a confederation of three kingdoms, the mNga' ris skor gsum, between 923 and 950.<sup>9</sup> The king's dominion was divided among his three sons, nicknamed the sTod kyi mgon gsum, translatable as "the three *mgon* of the Western highlands", due to the common suffix of their names. The eldest, dPal gyi lde Rig pa mgon, reigned over Mar yul (Ladakh and Zangskar), while the other two, bKra shis mgon and lDe

gtsugs mgon, ruled over Gu ge - Pu hrang.<sup>10</sup> During the first phase of the confederation it appears that the Gu ge - Pu hrang kingdoms assumed a pivotal role.

The Tibetan rulers, freshly established in the new territories, found themselves in need of a sound factor suitable to qualify them as the lawful sovereigns. From the art-historical, epigraphic and literary evidence, it is possible to conjecture that they chose to employ a balance of "soft power" and "hard power". Soft power could be acquired through culture, that is, values, art and religion, while hard power relied on the economic (such as, for instance, improving international trade along the caravan routes), the political (noticeable in the use of marriage alliances) and the military. In fact, according to the *La dvags rgyal rabs*, sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon married 'Bro za 'Khor skyong, a princess of the 'Bro clan (Petech 1977: 15; 1997: 231; Vitali 1996: 171, 196, 199–200), an ancient clan whose original home was the kingdom of Yang t'ung, corresponding approximately to Upper Zhang chung, i.e. Gu ge and Pu hrang (Tucci 1956: 104; Petech 1977: 9, 15–16; 1997: 230). The 'Bro actually interacted for a long time with the history of Tibet, supplying spouses and ministers to the Tibetan monarchs (Petech 1977: 15–16; 1997: 231; Stein 1986: 85; Dotson 2012: 186) and participating to the military campaigns of the empire: Tun-huang was conquered in 784–787 by 'Bro Khri sum rje sTag snang (Vitali 1996: 195–197). Therefore, once the Tibetan empire was in decay, the 'Bro could have intentionally supported sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon's westward expedition (Petech 1977: 16; 1997: 231; Snellgrove 1987: 471) in order to re-establish their authority over Pu hrang and, perhaps, to extend their influence up to Mar yul. Hence, a marriage alliance binding together the 'Bro family with the actual scion of the old, revered Tibetan royal house could be interpreted as a political move aimed at mutually legitimate and strengthen the power over the area, obtaining the necessary allegiance and submission for the creation of the new mNga' ris kingdom.

The religious factor played a role of paramount importance in order to legitimate the new ruling classes, conferring upon them a sacred authority, and was instrumental in unifying the vast dominion and amalgamating the indigenous populations through a common cultural identity (Tucci 1933: 68; Snellgrove 1987: 470–484). The mNga' ris scenario in the Tibetan post-imperial period consequently became marked by the interaction of kingship and religion. The pro-

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Gangs can Ti tse or Ti se.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, the collapse of the Yar lung dynasty should coincide with the killing of dPal 'khor btsan (893–923, or 865–895), son of 'Od srungs (843–905), who was the posthumous son of Glang dar ma; dPal 'khor btsan maintained the control over the larger part of dBus gtsang (cf. Roerich 1988: 37; Petech 1977: 14–15; 1997: 231; Stein 1986: 51).

<sup>5</sup> The meaning of the term *stod* is "high", but in ancient Tibetan it is commonly employed as "west"; *stod phyogs* can be translated either as "the high direction" or "the west" (cf. Beckwith 1993: 203–205). Therefore the use of the term mNga' ris / sTod appears really appropriate, since these Himalayan areas are located towards the high direction, i.e. to the north of dBus gtsang, and stretch towards west, being crossed by very high mountain ranges.

<sup>6</sup> Also known as Ma pang g.yu mtsho, Mapang Yutso.

<sup>7</sup> Where the Zhang chung capital, Khyung lung dngul mkhar, rose (see, amongst others, Tucci 1956: 75, 93; Snellgrove and Richardson 1986: 26; Stein 1986: 15; Petech 1997: 230; Martin 2007: 111–114; Watt 2007: 46).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., among the others, Vitali 1996: 155.

<sup>9</sup> Petech 1997: 232; according to Roberto Vitali (verbal communication) the reign was founded in 912.

<sup>10</sup> It seems that Gu ge and Pu hrang, the dominion of the second and third brother, were soon amalgamated under the same branch of the royal family, possibly because one of the sTod kyi mgon gsum had died without male issue (cf., Petech 1977: 17; 1997: 232; Snellgrove 1987: 471; Vitali 1996: 153–161).

fusion of resources in the Second Diffusion was thus aimed to confer a sort of divine royalty upon the mNga' ris kings, ratifying them as the true successors of the *dharmarāja*—*chos kyi rgyal po*, those who ruled over the monarchic Tibet (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century). The mNga' ris kings stressed the search for the adherence to and the study of the religious Indian sources, since the renaissance of Buddhism was connected to a vigorous reform movement, based on the methodical reinstatement of the pure and original Indian Buddhist orthodoxy, as expressed by the *bKa' shog* (edicts or open letters) issued in 986 by the monk-king Ye shes 'od, and in 1092 by the monk-king Zhi ba 'od, 1016–1111 (Karmay 1980a, 1980b; Snellgrove 1987: 186–187, 474).

In this context, the figure and works of Rin chen bzang po (958–1055), the Great Translator (*lo tsā ba chen po*), who made a number of journeys in India playing an important role in linking the land of the Buddha with the Tibetan plateau,<sup>11</sup> becomes extremely valuable, as do those of Atiśa Dipaṅkara Śrījñāna (982–1054), the renowned *paṇḍita* hailing from the Indian *mahāvihāra* of Vikramaśīla, together with their main patrons, *lha bla ma* Ye shes 'od (958–1036 or 947–1024), his nephew lHa lde (who ascended the throne in 996) and his grand-nephew Byang chub 'od (984–1078).<sup>12</sup>

Characterised by the high level of the philosophical debates and by the munificent patronage extended to the rising schools of translators and commentators, as well as to the schools of architects, sculptors and painters, the mNga' ris kingdoms soon became a pole attracting scholars, artists and pilgrims. The political elites which settled across the confederation's territory could indeed be definable as "cosmopolitan", for they favoured the circulation of cultural and visual patterns between different geographical contexts, thus broadening the artistic lexicon and intellectual horizons. The importance of Western Himalaya in the whole history of Buddhism is well exemplified by gZhon nu dpal (1392–1481), the 'Gos *Lo tsā ba*, who in the *Blue Annals* asserted: "The doctrine first re-appeared in mNga' ris and later in Central Tibet (dBus and gTsang)" (Roerich 1988: 68).

The Second Diffusion is accompanied by the construction of a network of several temples and *mchod rten*, which still mark the Western Tibetan territories, monuments which rose as architectural outposts of the Buddhist faith, defining the area under the political and cultural

power of the mNga' ris dynasties. Scattered along the valleys of Sutlej, Spiti, Lingti, Chandra-Bhaga and Indus rivers, Buddhist monasteries appear to be distributed at strategic points, following the ramifications of the caravan routes, somehow composing a religious and cultural itinerary. The meeting between the Tibetan world and Indian Buddhism led to the formulation of an Indo-Tibetan style, associating the religious architecture of the Second Diffusion. The monuments built during this period bear evidence of Indian influences, especially in the plan, in the shape of wood carvings, and in the inner decorations, while the building materials and methods, the architectural composition and the chromatic choices belong to the Tibetan tradition. The flourishing of sacred sites in proximity to villages and verdant oases was going to transform the barren landscape and the cultural geography of Western Himalaya for the centuries to come, qualifying the territory and the whole environment as a Buddhist and Tibetan land, while the gateways *mchod rten*, rising along the paths or at crossroads like monumental doorways, indicate the direction to be followed, announcing the approach or the entrance to the sites.

#### PLAN AND ELEVATION

The Yum bu bla sgang (Yum bu bla mkhar, Yum bu lha khang) is generally acknowledged as the most ancient Tibetan palace. Almost destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), it was rebuilt around 1986. The structure appears constituted by a vertical and asymmetrical grouping of quadrangular, white volumes, perched on the summit of a mountain.

With the First Advent of Buddhism (*bstan pa sngar dar*), the symmetry and the symbolism of the Indian planning begin to be transferred to the Tibetan plateau, as it is well illustrated by the monastery of bSam yas, shaped like an architectural *maṇḍala*. The foundation in 779 is attributed to Khri srong lde btsan (742–797), the second of the three main *dharmā* kings<sup>13</sup> and, according to the traditional Tibetan sources, the prototype of bSam yas was the Odaṅṭapurī *mahāvihāra*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The first being Srong btsan sgam po (609–650) and the third Khri gtsug lde btsan, also called Ral pa can (805–836). The foundation of bSam yas was inspired by the Indian master Śāntarakṣita and, according to later sources, by Padmasambhava, *guru rin po che*, the precious master.

<sup>14</sup> Odaṅṭapurī has been identified at the archaeological site of Bihār Sharif. Analogous architectural typologies are findable in the Vikramaśīla *mahāvihāra*, at Antichak, in Somapura at Pāhārpur (both probably founded during the reign of Dharmapāla, 770–810, of the Pāla dynasty) and in Salban at Maināmatī (6<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>11</sup> For the *nam thar* (biography) of Rin chen bzang po cf. mainly Tucci 1933; Roerich 1988: 68–69; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 83–100; Namgyal Nyima Dagkar 1999.

<sup>12</sup> For the dating of Ye shes 'od, lHa lde and Byang chub 'od, see Vitali 1996: 179, 183, 245, 296–97.

Similarly, during the *bsTan pa phyi dar* in mNga' ris, the Himalayan architects drew from Indian sources, then they absorbed, combined and transformed the foreign influences, thus developing a new and original style which did not entirely reject the indigenous traditions, instead expressing the Indian designs through their own artistic taste.

Mirroring the Somapura typology (Fig. 1), whereas the plan consists in a Greek cross with a few recessed and projecting corners among the arms, also in the Shel (Shey) *mchod rten*, A lci *gSum brtsegs* (both in Ladakh) or in the Tho ling *gTsug lag khang* (ancient Gu ge, TAR), the cross-shaped planimetry clearly symbolises the *maṇḍala* cosmography. The cross's arms point in the four cardinal directions, while the centre (the ideal centre of the cosmos, the *axis mundi*), from which the universe emanates and reabsorbs, is evidenced by the uppermost architectural element, towering above the other structures. As in the mountain-shaped *mahāvihāra* of the Pāla-Sena period (8<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century), it is noticeable the *bhūmiprāsāda* typology, i.e. a truncated pyramid with gradually decreasing storeys towards the summit, intended as an architectural replica of mount Meru, the sacred mountain of Indo-Tibetan mythology, which rises like a pillar connecting earth and heaven. The diminishing terraces represent the steps and the peaks surrounding in concentric rings (*cakravāla*), as mountain ramparts, the world mountain.

Considering for instance the A lci *gSum brtsegs*, notwithstanding the fact that the process of transfer of Indian patterns is evidently readable, it is as much conspicuous for the process of translation and re-interpretation through the language of Tibetan traditional architecture.<sup>15</sup> The volumetric and chromatic impact is determined

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the vexed question of dating the A lci complex, in the first comprehensive work on A lci, the *'Du khang* has been dated in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the whole complex between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> century, except the *lHa khang So ma*, dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1979: 30–31, 79; 1980: 117–63); Khosla wrote that the temples are attributed to Rin chen bzang po (1979: 31). For Pal, the *'Du khang* is datable to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (1982: 33; 1989: 121), and Mortari Vergara too attributes the foundation of A lci towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (1987: 270). Goepfer, in a series of publications since 1990, basing himself on the observation of further inscriptions from the top storey of the *gSum brtsegs*, alongside paintings of a lineage of bKa' brgyud pa bla ma, concluded that: "the wall painting [...] together with their buildings were executed in several phases between the late eleventh or early twelfth century (Dukhang), the late twelfth or even the early thirteenth century (Sumtsek and 'Great Stupa'), and later in the thirteenth century (Lhakhang Soma)" (in Pal 1996: 84). Klimburg-Salter follows Goepfer's chronology (1994: 46). Luczanits wrote that all the buildings are attributable to the same period: "dating approximately from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century" (2004: 126). Recently (SEECHAC International Colloquium 2009, Paris) the Goepfer chronology has been questioned by Denwood, on the evidence of the palaeography of the

by the massive, solid walls, plastered with white clay (owing to a high percentage of kaolin content), which mirrors the sunlight like snow (Fig. 2). The three-tier elevation, decreasing towards the top, is marked by dark-red horizontal stripes painted across the building, dividing the volumes into three parts (Fig. 3). On the well-balanced façade, embellished by structural and decorative elements in reddish wood, three openings of decreasing size are lined up vertically: the pronaos on the ground floor, the loggia on the first floor and the door-window on the top storey, that is the skylight of the temple.

Also the *vedikā*, which circumscribed the Indian monuments, is re-interpreted into the *lcags ri* ("iron mountain"), which has the same more symbolic than defensive functions, that is, to separate the sacred territory inside the boundary wall from the profane outside, and to trace the pathway for the *pradakṣiṇā* (Fig. 4). Almost all the mNga' ris early temple complexes, as for instance A lci, Ta pho (Spiti, ancient Gu ge), Tho ling and Kha char/Khojarnath, also spelt 'Khor chags or Kho char (Pu hrang, TAR), share a horizontal plan, most probably borrowed from the Buddhist *mahāvihāra* that were rising in the north-eastern Indian plains (Fig. 5). Hence it appears evident that relatively flat ground was sought as building site, so as to have a location similar to that of the Indian sacred monuments, and therefore suitable to accomplishing (and consequently reproducing) the plan of Indian religious architecture, together with its symbolic geometry. In fact the Buddhist monasteries built in ancient Magadha, the heartland of Buddhism, as well as those scattered all over Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh, could use advantages of the flat Ganges plain in order to organise the structure according to a symmetrical outline. Whether lined up in single or double rows (as for instance at Nālandā, late 6<sup>th</sup> to early 7<sup>th</sup> century, Bihar) or arranged in a concentric scheme, with the main structure at the centre, surrounded by inhabited walls—composed by monk's cells and shrines—(as for instance at Somapura), unhampered by a steep gradient, these

inscriptions and the style of the paintings, re-proposing the date of the last third of the 11<sup>th</sup> century for the foundation of the *gSum brtsegs*. Subsequently Denwood's contribution has been published (2014: 159–66). Restating and amplifying his first hypothesis, Denwood convincingly explains that there are several places in the *gSum brtsegs* where inscriptions have been obliterated and, in some cases, re-inscribed, in crude *dbu can* with uneven lines, instead of cursive *dbu med* script, recurring in all the other original inscriptions in the *'Du khang* and in the *gSum brtsegs*. Denwood's conclusions are that the figures of the *bla ma* lineage, showing 'Jig rten mgon po, the founder of the 'Bri gung pa order, like their present accompanying inscriptions, are not original, arguing that were added at a later date, perhaps owing to a 'Bri gung pa re-consecration in the first two to three decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

*mahāvihāra* aim to reproduce the drawing of architectural *maṇḍala*, either in some of their buildings or on the whole design. In the layout of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century *chos 'khor* a series of small, unimposing temples, are arranged in a row in the flat space, surrounded by the *lcags ri*. Later on, approximately during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Indian influences were no longer deeply felt, it is possible to observe a sort of circular process. In fact the Western Himalayan architects resort to the ancient castle typology of monar-chic Tibet, as is noticeable for instance at dPe thub (Spituk), Khri g rtse (Tiktse) (Fig. 6), both in Ladakh, or at Drangkhār (Spiti). The monasteries' shape, from flat, symmetrical and horizontal, turns into a vertical, conglomerate structure, formed by a free, asymmetric assemblage of white boxes with sloping walls. Perched on the summit of craggy mountains, the imposing monasteries of the later period are perceptible as single, huge, tapering blocks, standing out as religious and architectural landmarks over kilometres of high plateau all around. The monasteries and fortresses seem to emerge from the mountains, following the contours of the slopes rhythmically, almost constituting their natural prolongation. As Tucci (1967) wrote, it is: "not an architecture that impresses motifs of lines and forms on its planned composition, but a construction close to nature, of which it continues the solemn and essential patterns". Sometimes the *lcags ri* is still traceable around the later monasteries, but generally no longer utilised for the *pradakṣiṇā*, due to the harsh configuration of the steep, rocky soil.

#### WOOD CARVINGS

Among the A lci *gSum brtsegs* fronton's wood carvings, of exquisite workmanship, an interesting detail is worth a close scrutiny. Along the overhanging timber beam of the portico's roof, a continuous fringe of elongated wooden pendants dangles, called *opalī* (Fig. 7). The *opalī* ornamentation appears to be widely recurrent in painted or sculptured representations of temples, and still persists in current Himalayan architecture, like for instance at Nirmaṇḍ (Fig. 8). When moved by the wind, touching each other the *opalī* produce a sort of music, transforming the palace into a singing architecture. However, the *opalī* may also suggest a stalactite curtain, allowing us to speculate whether all these temples were conceived as architectural replicas of the mountains, with the entrances' openings rendered like caves' archways.

The pediment of the *gSum brtsegs* pronaos seems to narrate the history of the stylistic interactions in the Himalayan areas, eclectically summed up over the course of the centuries. Themes originat-

ing in Gandhāran art, northern and central India, were harmoniously combined, according to the aesthetic inclinations and talents of the mNga' ris intellectual elites and handicraftsmen. The areas which mediated and conveyed the artistic themes were the surrounding Kashmiri, Himachali and Central Asian regions.<sup>16</sup> The final result of the process of transfer was the production of unique and original works of art and architecture, so permeated by the manner of selection and transposition of foreign styles that these early Himalayan temples became distinctive for their historical and geographical context, in other words these earthen and timber constructions are somehow unthinkable outside Western Tibet.

Along the pediment of the *gSum brtsegs* there is a line of three images, carved in wood and seated in *padmāsana* (Fig. 9). Each is surrounded by a variation of the trilobate arch and in turn enclosed by triangular frames whose apexes are emphasised by a projecting lion's head, reminiscent of the *kirttimukha* type. The Buddha at the centre is perhaps identifiable as Akṣobhya in *nirmāṇakāya*, since he is sitting on a lotus throne performing the *bhūmiśparśamudrā* (being dressed as a monk could be also Śākyamuni during the *māravijaya*) (Fig. 11), while on his right the Buddha Vajrasattva is clearly recognisable by his attributes and the position of his arms: in fact he holds the *vajra* in his right hand, raised at the heart level, and the bell (*ghaṇṭā*) in the left hand, at hip level (Fig. 7 and 10). The bejewelled goddess on the right-hand side, gracefully carved, wearing armlets, a necklace, earrings and a diadem, could tentatively be identified as Locanā, the mystical spouse of Akṣobhya (Fig. 7 and 9). If this interpretation is correct, the triad on the *gSum brtsegs* fronton coherently represents the head of the *vajra* family, Akṣobhya, at the very centre (Fig. 11), flanked by two deities related to the same *vajra* family.

The trilobate arch, a recurring element in Indian art, which probably travelled from the Gandhāric *stūpa* of Ali Maṣjid at the Khyber pass, is mediated and transmitted by the Kashmiri schools of the Kārkoṭa (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century) and Utpala (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century) periods.<sup>17</sup> In fact one of the unquestionable sources of the trilobate arch, inserted in triangular and/or trapezoidal gable motifs, can be clearly identified within

<sup>16</sup> The activity of Indian artists in mNga' ris is recorded by literary sources such as the Rin chen bzang po *nam thar* (Tucci 1933: 66–67; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 92). According to Handa "necessarily all the artists might not have been from Kashmir, but also from the neighbouring country, viz., Chamba, Kullu etc., where the art of image-making, in what is known as Kashmiri style, had become very developed by that period" (1994: 86).

<sup>17</sup> The diffusion of the trilobate arch in Indian Himalaya is outlined by Khosla (1979: 26f, 34f, 57, 73); Di Mattia (1996: 100; 2002: 105). For the trilobate arch in Kashmir cf., amongst others, Mitra 1977.



the art and architecture of Kashmir.<sup>18</sup> However, in Kashmir, where the art of wood carving still flourishes, the wooden prototypes are not to be found, probably in consequence of historical and climatic factors, while a series of ancient stone exemplars remain.<sup>19</sup> At Mārtāṇḍ, for instance, this pattern has been exploited to the full, providing a decorative motif and used structurally across the entrance of the main temple. Here indeed a lofty opening like a *torāṇa* is surmounted by an imposing trilobate arch resting on two jambs and giving access to a square *maṇḍapa*. The peaked roof and the pyramidal shape of the tympanum framing the arch is partly ruined. Along the Mārtāṇḍ temple platform runs a series of niches each containing the image of a deity carved in stone relief, and surrounded by variations of the trilobate arch; often two engaged dwarf columns support a triangular or trapezoidal gable, as in the case of Sūrya niche (Fig. 12).

In the *gSum brtsegs* fronton the three niches rest on a wooden beam, carved with an uninterrupted phyto-morphological motif and laterally supported by lion-shaped corbels. Above, the fronton is concluded by a wooden beam drilled in a chess-board pattern, and marked at regular intervals by carved leonine heads which adorn the exposed end of the rafters (Fig. 7 and 9).

It is worthwhile to compare the A lci fronton with the Ribba *Lo tsā ba lha khang* (Kinnaur, ancient Gu ge) pediment (Fig. 13): firstly because the material employed appears to be very similar—the same type of reddish wood—and secondly because of the stylistic analogy in the wood carving. On the Ribba's tympanum a Buddha image is in the middle of the lintel. The lintel is enlivened by a continuous moulding decorated with alternating fillets of carved flowers and foliage. The Buddha image is surrounded by an architectural frame formed by a trilobate arch laterally supported by dwarf columns. The centre of the tympanum is taken up by a blind *caitya* window, screened by a wooden panel which is drilled with chess-board work. The *caitya* windows—later called *gavākṣa*—are shaped like ogival arches and widely employed in the rock-cut *caitya* and *vihāra* of the western Deccan. The *gavākṣa* are sometimes screened by dressed stone drilled with chess-board work, as is observable on the façade of cave 9 (first century BCE) and in the façade of cave 19 (Vakāṭaka period, late 5<sup>th</sup> century) at Ajaṇṭā, dominated by a large *caitya* window.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> But not unknown in the Himachal Pradesh region: see for instance the wooden pediment of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple at Bharmaur (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>19</sup> This typology is to be found at the temples of Malot (beginning 8<sup>th</sup> century), Parihāsapura (second quarter 8<sup>th</sup> century), Mārtāṇḍ (second quarter 8<sup>th</sup> century), Pandreṭhan (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century) and Avantisvāmin (9<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>20</sup> The chequer-board pattern, already evident in Gandhāra art, can be seen in

At Ribba the *caitya* window is carved along the same vertical axis as the Buddha image. The apex of the line thus created, which crosses the centre of the tympanum lengthwise, coincides with the culmination point of the *caitya* window itself. The summit of the ogival arch is crowned by a pinnacle shaped like an *āmalaka*, a fluted, rounded element ubiquitous in Indian architecture and recognizable, for example, in the capitals adorning the columns of cave 19 at Ajaṇṭā. Surrounding the *caitya* arch are carved lotus flowers. Along the pediment edges there is beadwork encircled by a phyto-morphological carving similar to an acanthus scroll, thus composing a concentric multiple frame, each frame progressively projecting.

#### COLUMNS AND CAPITALS

The two wooden columns which divide the *gSum brtsegs* portico's spread into three parts, have fluted shafts and capitals decorated with Ionic-style side volutes (Figs. 9, 10). The local rendering and interpretation of the Ionic style may denote a recollection and persistence of the Hellenistic influences from the ancient art of historical north-western India, in particular from the architectural lexicon of Gandhāra. In fact, one of the oldest specimens of a stone capital with side volutes in this area was found in the temple of Jaṇḍiāl, at Taxila (65 BCE–58 BCE).<sup>21</sup> The transfer of an element of Indo-Greek matrix into the Himalayan architectural language would of course have been indirect, and would have been mediated by the surrounding regions of Kashmir, Central Asia and Himachal Pradesh.<sup>22</sup>

Also the capitals on the sequence of dwarf columns across the space between one triangular niche and another along the *gSum brtsegs* fronton show the local interpretation of the Ionic and Doric classical styles. Likewise, the little wooden columns which sup-

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the lattice windows of Indian structural architecture, where the stone carved specimens can be utilised with decorative functions or as actual windows, admitting light into the building as, for example, at the Lād khān temple of Aihole, dated to the late 7<sup>th</sup> early 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>21</sup> See Marshall 1960: plate VIII; Rowland 1970: 138.

<sup>22</sup> However in Kashmir only a couple of side volutes capitals have been found among the architectural fragments at the site of Sugandheśa (11<sup>th</sup> century) near Śrīnagar (see Kak 1933: 150), while this typology seems more recurrent in the Central Asian centres of Miran, Subachi, Loulan and Duldur Aqur (see Mortari Vergara 1987: 273; Whitfield and Farrer 1990: 149, fig. 119) as well as in Himachal Pradesh, where side volutes capitals are noticeable at Nirmaṇḍ (11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century), Gaurī Śaṅkara (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century), Lakṣaṇā Devī (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century), Śaktidevī (9<sup>th</sup> century) (see Postel, Neven and Mankodi 1985: 289, fig. 430; 43–44, figs. 41–42; 45, fig. 47). Regarding the Ionic style at A lci see Khosla 1979: 57.

port the roof of the first storey loggia (Fig. 14), are channelled and crowned by elaborate capitals composed of an *āmalaka* surmounted by an echinus from which side volutes jut out. The capital with side volutes is an architectural feature recurring in mNga' ris at the beginning of *phyi dar*, since it is to be found not only at A lci, but also at Ta pho, Lha lung (Spiti), Gung rang (Lahul), Shalkar (Kinnaur). In the course of the time a process of absorption and transformation of the capital's shape based on stylistic and functional grounds is eventually recognisable. In fact, it is observable how at Nako (Kinnaur) (Fig. 15), Drangkhar (Figs. 16, 17), Kibber (Spiti), Lamayuru (Ladakh), as well as in the temples of the Pin valley and of Lahul, double and triple side volutes radiate from the echinus, concluding the top of the column and extending the whole capital's profile along the beam. This architectural device may answer to a technical requirement, since it allows for a wider supporting surface between the columns and the trabeation, thus contributing to the stability, balance and solidity of the entire structure.<sup>23</sup>

One more case of the transfer of capital typology is noticeable but, as far as I know, it is diffused only in the Kinnaur and Spiti areas. This is the *pūrṇaghāṭa* or *ghaṭapallava* type, consisting of a vase from which four wreaths of stylised foliage hang laterally. The source of this type of capital is traceable to the rock-cut architecture of India, for example at Ajaṅṭā, in caves 23 and 26 (5<sup>th</sup> century) and Ellora, caves 6 (early 7<sup>th</sup> century), 10—Viśvakarma cave—(5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century), 14 (beginning 6<sup>th</sup> century) and 21 (mid-6<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>24</sup>

In Western Himalaya the *ghaṭapallava* capitals can be found, for instance, at the Dakhanī Mahādeva temple (also called Dakṣeśvara, 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century) of Nirmaṇḍ (Sutlej valley), whereas the foliage is naturalistic (Fig. 18), in the wooden *maṇḍapa* of Pangi (Kinnaur), in the *Lo tsā ba lha khang* of Ribba (Kinnaur) (Fig. 19) and in the *gTsug lag khang* of Ta pho. At Ribba some elements of these capitals seem to be of recent workmanship, to judge from the timber quality and squarish shape, contrasting with the round outline of the more ancient timber components. As usual, whereas there is evidence of lively cults, once the older parts deteriorated with age, local artists must have replaced them, faithfully imitating the originals.

The *ghaṭapallava* type of capital should have been transferred to mNga' ris through the Himachali area, considering its recur-

rence in the local religious architecture and the well-developed wood and stone carving traditions there. So far the emphasis has been on the unquestionable contribution made by Kashmiri and Pāla schools, while the importance of Himachal region has been largely undervalued. Himachali centres should have played a major role in absorbing, elaborating and re-proposing artistic and architectural themes from Northern and Central India, acting sometimes as a vehicle for their diffusion in Western Tibet.<sup>25</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As mentioned above, the present article does not pretend to be exhaustive, instead it should be intended as just the beginning of a journey to discover the myriad of interactions which took place in Western Himalaya during the *phyi dar*. The purpose of this contribution consists in trying to illustrate—by documentary evidence—the processes of transfer, translation and transformation in the early art and architecture of the Western Tibetan kingdoms.

With the birth and rise of the mNga' ris kingdoms two main factors interacted: cultural receptivity and economic resources. The developing political and cultural power of the Western Tibetan dynasties is expressed through the ability of fostering—by munificently patronising—the cultural, religious, artistic and architectural growth, which is visual testimony to the strength and territorial expansion of the mNga' ris skor gsum confederation. The extraordinary variety of ideas and typologies in architecture, sculpture and painting, support the hypothesis that the new queens, kings and clergy were able to establish the political circumstances for cultural and trade relationships. The intellectual elites and the ruling classes invited and gathered artists and spiritual masters at their court in order to enliven the cultural life by philosophical debates and by erecting the spaces designated to give hospitality to the religious councils and to the studies and meditations as well. The profound interest in the artistic beauty of the sacred spaces reached to the point "that aesthetic perfection was to be rewarded under the terms of one of the law of the *chos.rtsigs* Ye.shes'od issued in 988" (Vitali 1996: 271). The copious transfer of foreign patterns, themes and styles is evident in a number of Western Himalayan monuments: each of them stands

<sup>23</sup> A local source, referring to the Drangkhar triple side volutes capitals, called them "the classical order of Spiti".

<sup>24</sup> The shaft is crowned by a pot facing upwards, out of which generally issue foliage and flowers. This style was described as "standard Gangetic" by Pereira (1987: 20; see also illustrations: 3, 9, 18, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 38, 43, 47).

<sup>25</sup> Indeed the *ghaṭapallava* capital is recognisable in a large number of temples in Himachal Pradesh, like the Lakṣaṇā Devī at Bharmaur (8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century), the Śaktidevī at Chatrārhi (9<sup>th</sup> century), the Viśveśvara Mahādeva at Bajaura (9<sup>th</sup> century), the Gaurī Śaṅkara at Chamba (10<sup>th</sup> century) and the Hari Rāi at Chamba (11<sup>th</sup> century); see Postel, Neven, Mankodi 1985: 43–44; Thakur 1996: 36, plates I, II, XXXVI, XXXVII, LVIII, LXIV, CIX.

out as an original creation, each resulting in a unique rendering of the themes chosen and then absorbed, but all are associated by the eclectic nature of the Indo-Tibetan style. Presumably companies of itinerant artists were travelling from a monasteries to another, along the sacred circuits of mNga' ris like, perhaps, the thirty-two artists brought in the Ox year 1001 by Rin chen bzang po.<sup>26</sup> Thereafter, local workshops gradually should have sprang out, giving rise to a sort of artistic renaissance which was going to pervade, with sumptuous paintings, richly elaborate clay sculptures and wood carvings, the whole mNga' ris architecture. The Indo-Tibetan style could be therefore synthetically defined as an artistic language deriving by the accumulation, selection and fusion of multiple regional styles—predominantly developed in northern India—blended into a new aesthetic vocabulary according to local taste, craftsmanship and geo-political context. To study and to catalogue the recurring elements of this artistic lexicon should lead to the identification of a common semantic code in the sacred architectures scattered along the valleys and the mountains of the Himalayan highlands. Singling out and analysing the elements of the Indo-Tibetan stylistic code could eventually also contribute to recognising and grouping together the early Buddhist temples patronized by the ruling classes of Gu ge - Pu hrang and Mar yul. By employing this methodology, these structures should be placed in their historical and cultural context, an epoch which these monuments in their turn artistically narrate through their plans, elevations, façades and inner decorations; the high appreciation of the Indian sources can be regarded, after all, as the key-note of the beginning of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism.

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<sup>26</sup> On the calculation of the date of the arrival of the thirty-two Kha che artists see Vitali 1996: 270–271.

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Fig. 1: Aerial perspective of Somapura mahāvihāra, Pāhārpur, Bangladesh, 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century (photo: Ahmed Nazimuddin, 1992).



Fig. 2: Side view of the gSum brtsegs, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).





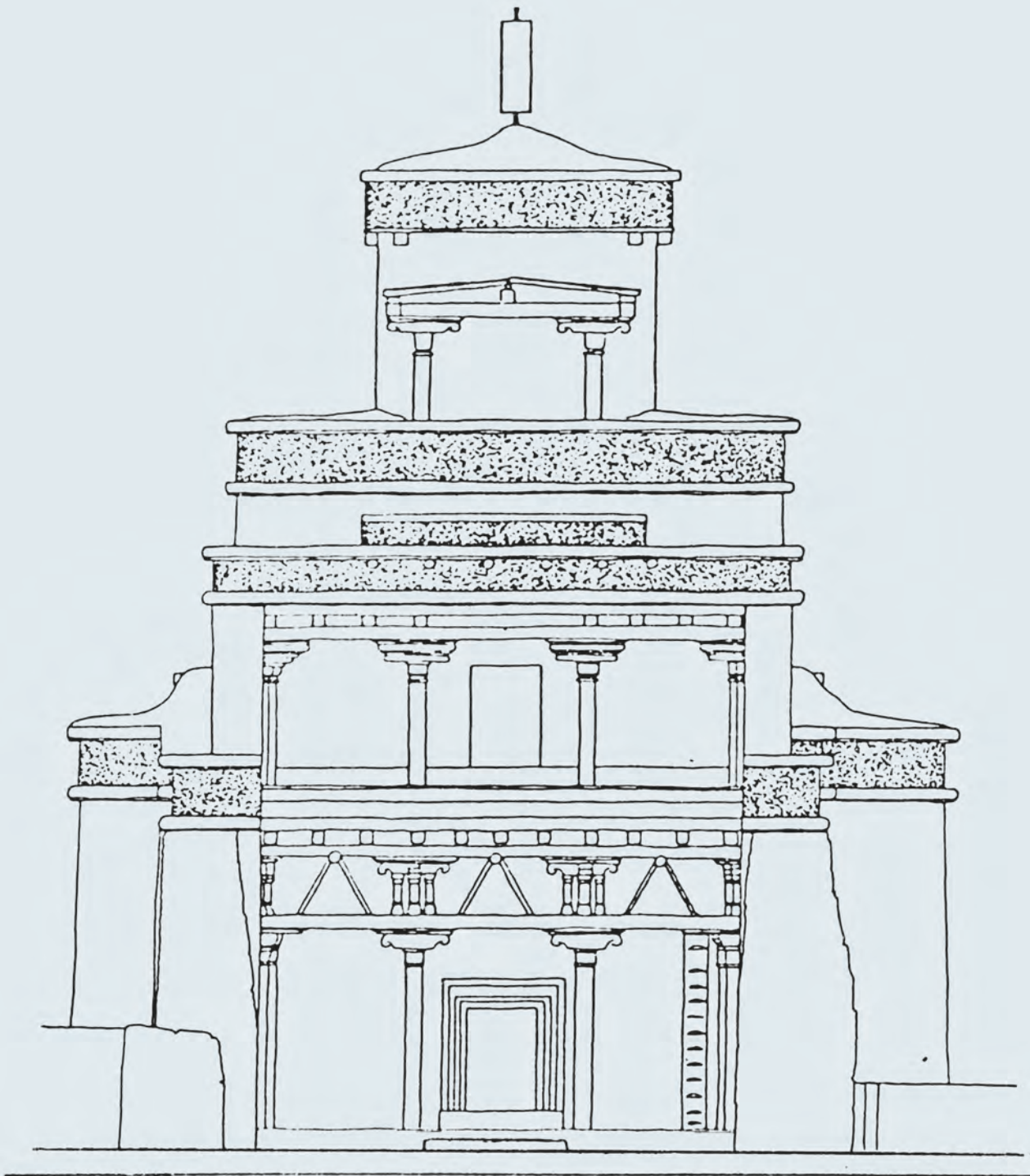


Fig. 3: Drawing of the *gSum brtsegs* elevation (after Di Mattia 1996: fig. 5).

Fig. 4: *lcags ri* and *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, A lci, Ladakh (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).



Fig. 5: Panoramic view of the Ta pho planimetry, Spiti, ca. 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).







Fig. 6: General view of Tiktse monastery, Ladakh, ca. 15<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1988).



Fig. 7: *gSum brtsegs* wooden fronton: detail showing the *opali*, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: B. Castelli, 2006).



Fig. 8: Wooden loggia with *opalī*, Nirmaṇḍ, Kullu (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).



Fig. 9: *gSum brtsegs* wooden fronton: general view showing the sequence of triangular niches, the trabeation and columns' capitals, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).







Fig. 10: *gSum brtsegs* pronaos showing Vajrasattva on the left-hand side of the fronton, wood-carving, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).



Fig. 11: Akṣobhya at the centre of the *gSum brtsegs* fronton, wood-carving, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).



Fig. 12: Sūrya niche, Mārtāṇḍ, Kashmir, 8<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1988).



Fig. 13: Wooden tympanum on the northern side of the *Lo tsā ba lha khang*, Ribba, Kinnaur, ca. 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1999).





Fig. 14: Wooden columns and capitals, first storey loggia of the *gSum brtsegs*, A lci, Ladakh, 11<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia, 1980).



Fig. 15: Capital at the *Lo tsā ba lha khang*, painted wood-carving, Nako, Kinnaur, ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).



Fig. 16: Wooden capital at Drangkhar, Spiti  
(photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).



Fig. 17: Wooden capital at Drangkhar, Spiti  
(photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).





Fig. 18: Wooden *ghaṭapallava* capital at the Dakhanī Mahādeva temple, Nirmaṇḍ, Kullu, 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1995).



Fig. 19: Wooden *ghaṭapallava* capital at the *Lo tsā ba lha khang*, Ribba, Kinnaur (photo: M. Di Mattia and M. Polichetti, 1999).