



The architecture of the empty shells of Nyar-ma

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The monastic complex of Nyar-ma in the Indus Valley near Shey is considered to be one of the foundations of Rin-chen-bzang-po and the origin of the site is therefore dated around 1000 A.D. The site consists of five temples and about a dozen of chötens within a rectangular wall, of which today only parts of two sides are recognisable. Today the complex seems to be in ruins, as the roofs, including the support constructions and the wooden door constructions were removed. The wall paintings and sculptures which have been exposed to weather and rain, are almost completely destroyed. When Snellgrove and Skorupski visited the site in the 1970s, they referred to the buildings of Nyar-ma as “empty earthen shells”. This point of view, which is based on the art historian interest in decorative arts such as sculpture, painting and wood carving, completely ignored the information about the architectural practice of Second Diffusion of Buddhism, which is still provided by this monastic complex. Therefore research has been undertaken in two respects.

First, especially because of its devastated state, the buildings of Nyar-ma allow the analysis of building technologies such as brick laying, the construction methods for foundations and the different layers of plaster. Where the plaster is missing, joints can be investigated. Second, an analysis was carried out on layout and orientation, i.e. a) influences of topography and the sun path, b) patterns of space organisation within the compound and c) proportions, in order to identify geometric criteria for the design and relations to iconometry. In terms of site layout, two geometrical grids could be identified, one referring to the cardinal points, and a second grid, including the surrounding wall, which does not follow the cardinal points. The site layout is a superimposition of these grids and has a higher complexity than other compounds like e.g. Tabo or the Alchi Chos 'khor. Most attention was paid to the biggest temple at the northern part of the enclave. This building is almost identical to the Tabo Main Temple. It is bigger in size and the ambulatory has three niches, which makes the design even more elaborate. By means of exact plans and analysis it will be possible to show the influence of structural necessities as well as iconometric patterns and proportions on the architectural design practices of the 2nd Diffusion of Buddhism.

Klimburg-Salter, Deborah (1997), *Tabo – A Lamp for the Kingdom*, Milano.

Snellgrove, David L. and Tadeusz Skorupski (1980), *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, Vol. 1, Warminster.