

The 'White Temple' at Tsaparang



or the forgotten history of the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang



Universiteit
Leiden

Master Asian Studies | History, Arts and Culture of Asia | MA-thesis
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1. Introduction

The 'White Temple' at Tsaparang is dated on literary grounds to around 1540¹, but judging from the painting style present in the temple, this appears doubtful². The iconographic program of this temple, its 'Indian' style wall paintings and the beautiful sculptures attached to the walls indicate that this temple was built before 1440. The paintings in the other two major shrines at Tsaparang, the Mandala Temple and the Red Temple, are tentatively dated to the mid-15th century³. The hypothesis of a reversed chronology for the red and the white temples was raised⁴, but refuted⁵, leaving us with a tantalizing problem.

The problem

The temples of Tsaparang preserve in quality and quantity the most important pre-sixteenth century works of art of Tibet next to Shalu and Gyantse⁶, but the chronology of these temples is far from being clarified⁷. The problem focuses on the 'White Temple'. The conviction that this temple was built around 1540 is based upon the *Vaidurya-ser-po*, a late 17th century Tibetan history written by Desi Sanggye Gyatso, stating that the *mchod khang dkar po* (the white temple) of Tsaparang was built by King Jigten Wangchuk and his brothers⁸.

Suspicion that this temple was established already about a century earlier arises from the fact that the iconographic program of this temple is predominantly dedicated to the Vairocana cycles of the Yoga-Tantras⁹ and the fact that large numbers of small painted figures populating these cycles are 'nearer to Indian models' than the images painted in the other shrines at Tsaparang¹⁰. "They are 'Indian' for the accuracy of execution, the delicacy of drawing, lightness of movements, and for those chiaroscuro (light and shade effects) which have disappeared in later paintings", according to the Italian Tibetologist Professor Tucci¹¹, who was the first scholar to write about the temples of Tsaparang. The prevalent presence of Vairocana cycles and the 'Indian' features of the paintings indicate that this temple was built before 1440.

1.2. Thesis questions

When was the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang built and by whom?

Why was this knowledge obscured until now?

¹ Aschoff 1989 : 106-7, Chan 1994 : 440, Chayet 1994 : 204, Tropper 2010 : 51, Klimburg-Salter 2015 : 45, 178

² Van Ham 2016 : 197

³ Van Ham 2017 : 364 with regards to the Mandala Temple, and Ricca 1997 : 198 with regards to the Red Temple of Tsaparang. Ricca states that this temple contains murals which are fine examples of the 'School of Gyantse' which emerged in the 1430's

⁴ Luczanits 2009 : 144-5

⁵ Tropper 2010 : 51

⁶ Henss 1996 : 208

⁷ Luczantis 2009 : 144

⁸ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.6-7 and Henss 1996 : 225 n.26 and Tropper 2010 : 51

⁹ Tanaka 1992 : 868

¹⁰ Tucci 1935/1989 : 8

¹¹ Tucci 1935/1989 : 8



fig. 4. The 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, 2017



fig 5. Interior of The 'White Temple' of Tsaparang/ Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang, 2017



fig 6. Sculptures of clay and wall paintings in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang. (Photo courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)

1.3 Method

I engaged this problem and reconstructed the foundation history of the 'White Temple' at Tsaparang combining the following methods:

1. I studied primary sources such as the Vaidurya-ser-po to find clues for identification;
2. I studied Tucci's reports to learn on which basis he assigned names to the temples in 1933, how knowledgeable were his local guides, did they share correct information with the professor?
3. I studied hundreds of images searching for information on the foundation history¹² of the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang;
3. I consulted all possible sources and pieced many small bits of information from dozens of separate sources together to construct the foundation narrative of the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang.

Halfway my research I understood that obscuration of the foundation narrative of the 'White Temple' at Tsaparang is due to the fact that three temples have been mixed up. The reason I write 'White Temple' in quotation marks is, that this temple should be called the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang. The white temple, *mchod khang dkar po*, was not shown to Tucci by his guides when he visited Tsaparang. The current Lötang temple, a small, in the 21st century rebuilt shrine with 11th century features such as its floorplan and location¹³, was the Jampa Lhakhang or Maitreya Temple in 1948¹⁴. The current Tara Temple was built as the *mchod khang dkar po*, the white temple, in the 1530's by King Jigten Wangchuk, who was a follower of the Geluk tradition¹⁵ and had his son Sherab Ozer, who was abbot of the Lötang Monastery¹⁶, portrayed at the wall of this small temple¹⁷.

The objective of the present study is to reconstruct the foundation history of the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang. Because of the fact that temples were mixed up, this thesis encompassed several narratives: the foundation story of the 'White Temple'/the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang, taking place in the first half of the 15th century, the story about the *mchod khang dkar po*, the white temple, built in the 16th century, and the story about the way these temples got their names in the 20th century. What happened, what caused Professor Tucci to make a mistake?

¹² Thanks to Peter van Ham, who made a part of the photo archive of Lionel Fournier available to me and to Christian Luczanits, who made pictures taken by Helmut and Heidi Neumann and Tshering Gyalpo available.

¹³ Tucci 1935/89 : 167

¹⁴ Govinda 1960 :241

¹⁵ Vitali 1996 :

¹⁶ Vaidurya-ser-po 222.8

¹⁷ Aschoff 1997 : 115

2. Discovering Tsaparang

Tsaparang is situated in the south-west of present day China, in the western part of the Tibetan plateau, in the Ngari prefecture of Tibet. It was the capital of a kingdom called Guge from the beginning of the 15th century until this kingdom was annexed by Ladakh and subsequently by Tibet in the 17th century. The Guge kingdom had actually already been founded in the 10th century and flourished in the 11th century¹⁸, after which an obscure period little is known about occurred, until Guge rose to a second 'Golden Age' in the 15th century. This time, the new capital, Tsaparang was established. From the 17th century on the area was controlled by the Tibetan government, who sent district and province governors, called *dzongpons* and *garpons*, from Lhasa for periods of three years at a time. These aristocrats, involuntarily stationed in this remote area, were generally, according to Tucci, "experts on extorting money from their subjects"¹⁹. The area dramatically depopulated. In due time, Tsaparang, Guge's citadel-like capital, was deserted. It turned into a 'scenic spot': a steep hill with almost 500 ruined buildings and about 900 caves, a ghost town amidst the highland desert, wherein as hidden gems a few ancient temples survived. And these forgotten temples contain precisely a few veritable masterpieces of Tibet's art-historical heritage.

2.1 Tucci's expeditions

The once thriving city had only a few inhabitants left when Tucci arrived here in 1933. There was a shepherd, who lived with his wife and child in a cave, and who acted as the custodian of the abandoned temples. There was also a monk from the Tholing monastery, eighteen kilometers to the east, who was in charge of the only temple at Tsaparang still being used for Buddhist practice in the first half of the 20th century, a temple which stood 350 meters apart from the rest²⁰. And there was a Tibetan official who acted as the substitute of the *dzongpon* and managed the 'winter residence' of this governor at Tsaparang²¹.

Locally, the history of Guge was forgotten, when Tibetology emerged as an academic discipline in the early 20th century and Tucci, being one of the first Tibetologists, journeyed Western Tibet in 1933. Before reaching Tsaparang, the Italian scholar visited Tholing, the main monastery in the area. The monastery had barely 30 monks he reported, of whom only one could read and write and had some knowledge of his religion: an ethnic Mongolian who had studied in Tashilunpo²². The monastery and the area depending on it were administrated by a *chansod* (administrator), who was in charge of all

¹⁸ Guge flourished in the first place thanks to gold mines in the region

¹⁹ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 173

²⁰ Govinda 1960 : 241-251

²¹ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 182. When Govinda visited Tsaparang in 1948, a nun, a relative of the *dzongpon* managed that 'house'. Govinda said that the *dzongpon* visited Tsaparang only once or twice a year on his official tour of inspection and tax collection (Govinda 1960 : 241)

²² Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 162.

disciplinary issues, and a *khampo* (abbot) who handled religious affairs. The *khampos* and *chansods* were elected from Lhasa every three years, just like the *dzongpons* and *garpons*²³. From the book “Secrets of Tibet” which is based on the diary Tucci and his assistant, the photographer Eugenio Gherzi kept during their journey, we gather that these members of the Lhasa nobility and the local herdsmen and monks were utterly surprised when the Italians arrived at Tholing with a caravan of about sixty men and dozens of horses, yaks and mules²⁴ in order to study and photograph the temples of Tholing and Tsaparang. The *dzongpon*, who Tucci had asked permission to visit the monasteries in Ngari, three weeks before arriving at Tholing in his summer residence at a place called Shangsha, was eager to see pictures of Italy and was totally astonished that the European scholar had come from so far to study the crumbling Tibetan monuments²⁵.

Tucci knew about Tsaparang from the Jesuit mission that had briefly been established here in the 1620's²⁶, from a British civil servant, C.M. Young, who had visited Tsaparang one day in 1912²⁷, and mostly from his own studies of the life and works of Rin-chen-bzang-po, the great translator who had been a co-founder of Tholing and who incited the renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet around the millennium²⁸. Tucci, who mastered Sanskrit and Tibetan and was an authority in the field of Buddhist history, had published a book on Rin-chen-bzang-po²⁹. By showing this work to the abbot and monks of Tholing, their initial mistrust and reticence towards him photographing the monastery disappeared, and all the doors of the monastery opened widely³⁰.

2.2 Tucci's report

The Jesuits and Young had described Tsaparang roughly, not mentioning individual temples. The book Tucci wrote in 1935, directly after his second visit to Tsaparang, contains six chapters, devoted to six temples³¹. I will list the names of the book chapters and the current names of the temples below.

²³ The *khampo* in office during Tucci's visit was according to the Italian professor an erudite and spiritually advanced *geshe* from Drepung, who had however only just arrived in Guge and knew nothing about the history of the place. Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 156

²⁴ Klimburg-Salter 2015 : 43

²⁵ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 134

²⁶ Aschoff published letters of the missionaries, see Aschoff 1989

²⁷ Young 1919

²⁸ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : VII, VIII

²⁹ Tucci 1932

³⁰ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 159, 160

³¹ Tucci 1936/89

Tucci's bookchapters:

- I. The temple of Samvara/Bde-Mchog
- II. The Small Temple of Vajra-bhairava (*grub thob lha khang*)
- III. The White Temple
- IV. The Red Temple
- V. The Temple of the Prefect
- VI. The Lo-thang dgon-pa

Current names

Demchog Temple

Tudop Temple

White Temple

Red Temple

Yamantaka Temple

Lötang Monastery

Tara Temple

Tucci spent one day at Tsaparang in 1933 and probably also only one day in 1935. The temples contain hundreds square meters of paintings and dozens of sculptures, which obviously could not all be reported on in his book. Apart from that, Tucci writings are predominantly devoted to discussions on iconographic matters and religious complexities in response to the images of deities he perceived in the temples. Tucci did not write anything about the current Tara Temple³².

That being said, Tucci provided an enormous amount of valuable information. He reported extensively on the Small Temple of Vajra-bhairava, also known as the *grub thob lha khang* according to Tucci³³, a cave temple of which only meager remnants of its former back wall remain today³⁴.

Tucci drew special attention to the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang by calling it one of the most beautiful temples he ever visited in Western Tibet, 'a real royal temple where the pious dynasty had profusely bestowed its riches and shown its munificence'³⁵. He reported that the influence of 'the Indian manner' was very powerful in this temple, pointing out Indian features as the preference for depicting figures in half profile rather than frontal where the iconographic scheme allowed it³⁶ and indicating depictions of pan-Indian divinities, as the elephant-headed Ganapati (Ganesha), Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Chandra, Agni, Lakshmi, Ishvara, Indra and Parvati³⁷. This, and the fact that Tucci as well as later authors noticed that the paintings in the 'White Temple' stand out with regards to the accuracy of execution, delicacy, lightness of movements and light and shade effects, provided

³² Beck 2018 : 71

³³ 37 written pages and 37 pictures in Tucci's book *The Temples of Western Tibet and their Artistic Symbolism: Tsaparang* 1935/89

³⁴ Next to the remnants is a sign in English, Tibetan and Chinese reading *Tudop Temple, mthu grub lha khang* respectively *Tu Zhu La kang*. *Mthu grub lha khang* means Siddha Temple. For a picture of these remnants see Aschoff 1989 : 156

³⁵ Tucci 1935/89 : 112

³⁶ Tucci 1935/89 : 8

³⁷ Tucci 1935/89 : 120 The pan-Indian divinities are depicted at the western wall of the temple

the ground for questioning the alleged foundation date being around the year 1540.

Another important observation by Tucci concerns a clay sculpture of Tsongkhapa with his foremost disciples (fig. 17) in the 'White Temple'. He remarked that this was notably made at a later date than the other sculptures in this temple³⁸. This fact is of pivotal importance for establishing the foundation date of this temple, as we shall see later. The sculpture has been totally destroyed by erosion and vandalism today, but fortunately a photograph of this statue made by Gherzi remains³⁹.

The fact that Tucci called this temple the 'White Temple' however, is the main reason why it has not yet been possible until today to establish a reliable chronology of the temples at Tsaparang.



fig 7. Miniature painting in the 'White Temple' have Indian features, (accuracy of execution, delicacy, lightness of movements and light and shade effects). (Picture courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)

2.3 The Govindas

Twelve years after Tucci's expeditions, the German Buddhist author Lama Anagarika Govinda and his Indian wife, the photographer Li Gotami Govinda, obtained permission of the Dalai Lama to copy, trace and photograph the frescoes in the temples of Rin-chen-bzang-po at Tsaparang in 1947.

³⁸ Tucci 1935/89 : 122

³⁹ Tucci assistant, photographer, co-author Tucci 1935/89 Tav XCVIII (fig. 98)

Motivated by devotion and concern that the temples would be destroyed by neglect and vandalism in the future, the couple spent almost three months in the White and the Red Temple working under harsh conditions. The *dzongpon* on duty threatened to stop them, arguing that these two temples were actually not built by Rin-chen-bzang-po⁴⁰, but Govinda parried this discussion. The small apart standing temple surrounded by ancient chörtens and ruins, called Lothang dgonpa by Tucci, was called Chamba Lhakhang or Maitreya Temple by the monk from Tholing in charge of it, according to Govinda⁴¹. The books and pictures the Govindas published in the 1960 and 1979, have been of great value for later studies on Tsaparang⁴².



fig 8. Picture courtesy of Li Gotami-Govinda, 1948



fig 9. The same statue in 2002

Sculpture of clay in the 'White Temple'/Tashe Deygeling Tsuglagkhang, Avalokiteshvara

3. The cultural revolution

After the visit of the Govindas in 1948, Western scholars were not able to visit Tsaparang for several decades, for political reasons. Rigorous changes occurred in the region. The communists came to power in China and soon after also in Tibet. In 1959 the wealthiest half of the already small

⁴⁰ The dzongpon was actually right: these two temples were built in the 15th century

⁴¹ Govinda 1960 : 241 and 251

⁴² Govinda 1960 and Gotami Govinda 1979

population of Western Tibet fled to India out of fear for new regime⁴³. The Chinese reorganized the society. The monastery of Tholing was closed and abandoned and fell prey to vandalism and neglect. The temples of Tsaparang were plundered. The large gilt copper Buddha statues in the Red Temple and the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang Tucci and Gotami Govinda had photographed, were destroyed. A first-hand account of what happened precisely in the region was given in 2008 by Tsering Gyalpo, the director of the Religious Department at the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) in Lhasa, who was born in 1961 in Western Tibet⁴⁴. As a research associate to the universities of Vienna, Virginia, Harvard and Princeton and Berlin, he attributed tremendously to the scholarship on Tsaparang before his premature death in 2015.

3.1. Recent scholarship on Tsaparang

In the 1980's Jürgen Aschoff was among the first westerners to visit Tsaparang since the Govindas, followed in the 1990's by the specialist on Tibetan Buddhist art Kimiaki Tanaka, the author of a comprehensive guidebook Victor Chan and the specialist on Tibetan architecture Michael Henss. The time of the month-long expeditions with pack animals Tucci and the Govindas had undertaken lay behind, but the journey still took about a week in a land-cruiser hired from an authorized travel agency in Lhasa. This was then and is still the only legitimate way to get to Tsaparang. Personally, I visited Tsaparang as a tourist in 2002, 2007 and in 2017.

Several publications on Guge were issued: books which give an overview of the monuments in the area by Van Ham⁴⁵, Beck⁴⁶ and Tsering Gyalpo⁴⁷, studies which focus on the paintings in Guge by Henss⁴⁸ and Luczanits⁴⁹, detailed studies on mandalas and inscriptions at Tsaparang by Tanaka⁵⁰ and Tropper⁵¹ and a book on Tucci's discoveries by Klimburg-Salter for example⁵². Earlier, Aschoff published two books on Tsaparang⁵³, Chan described the place in his 'Pilgrimage Guide'⁵⁴ and the Administrative Committee of Archaeology of the Tibet Autonomous Region published a report

⁴³ Story of Tibet: a Tibetan family in 6 decades. *Professor Tsering Gyalpo has also been a visiting professor at Vienna University, the University of Virginia (2000-2001, 2004) and Harvard University (2003-4)*. (China.org.cn translated by Pang Li, Zhou Jing, Wu Huanshu and Wang Wei, June 30, 2008)
http://www.china.org.cn/china/features/content_15909533.htm

⁴⁴ See 43

⁴⁵ Van Ham 2017

⁴⁶ Beck 2018

⁴⁷ Gyalpo 2006 (Tsering Gyalpo (1961-2015), director of the Religious Department at the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) in Lhasa)

⁴⁸ Henss 1996

⁴⁹ Luczanits 2009

⁵⁰ Tanaka 1994

⁵¹ Tropper 2010

⁵² Klimburg-Salter 2015

⁵³ Aschoff & Weyer 1987 and Aschoff 1989

⁵⁴ Chan 1994

divided over two books of an extensive survey on Tsaparang⁵⁵.

These publications have in common, that they do not give a proper chronology for the temples at Tsaparang: they do not tell when these temples were built and by whom. Or better: most of them do say that 'the White Temple' is attributed to the early 16th century⁵⁶ and the Red Temple to approximately the 1470's⁵⁷ although the iconographic program and the style of the wall paintings in these temples have an opposite chronology. This problem is however not seriously addressed. Henss for example refrains from entering "into the rather difficult problem of stylistic chronology of the mural cycles in the three main shrines [at Tsaparang] which were all executed between the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, within a time span where hardly much stylistic "development" or "progress" from a western viewpoint might have happened"⁵⁸.

Against the trend, I would like to know when the temples at Tsaparang were built and by whom, and I think that what hindered the establishment of a credible chronology until now, is the fact that Tucci, in 1933 distributed the wrong names. The temple he called the 'White Temple' in 1933 is still called the 'White Temple' today, but seems to have been the main temple of the Lötang Monastery, the *Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang*, as I will demonstrate. The temple Tucci called the Lotang dgonpa/Blothang⁵⁹ was the Jampa Lhakhang or Maitreya Temple and Tucci passed straight by the *mchod khang dkar po*, without noticing it. He never set foot in the real white temple at Tsaparang, the current Tara Temple. On the basis of the rapports of the Govindas, Aschoff and Chan, I figured out why.

3.2. The study of primary sources

In the meantime, Tucci and other Tibetologists, mainly Luciano Petech, Roberto Vitali and Jörg Heimbrel, discovered classical Tibetan texts informing about aspects of the history of Guge: the *Vaidurya-ser-po* (Yellow Beryl) , the *mNga'.ris rgyal.rabs* (Royal Succession of Ngari), the *Ngor chen rnam thar* (Biography of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo) and the *MKhas-grub-rje 'i- gsung-'bum* (Letters of Khedrubje) for example. The articles based on these texts provided a large amount of very valuable information, but caused serious confusion too.

⁵⁵ ACATAR 1991

⁵⁶ Henss 1996 : 209

⁵⁷ Henss 1996 : 208

⁵⁸ Henss 1996 : 208

⁵⁹ Tucci changed his mind on the identification of this temple, see Tucci 1949 : 487 n. 26

The *Vaidurya-ser-po*, the history of the Gelukpa tradition by the regent Sangye Gyatso (1653–1705), would become the basis of a tentative chronology for the temples at Tsaparang or rather: Tucci's article on this late 17th century text, would become the basis for that. The article, titled *Tibetan Notes*, was published in 1949 in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies and in 1971 again, slightly adjusted, in Opera Minora II. It is a very intricate text, which is very hard to understand. The difficulty does not lie in the content, but in the way the text is written.

3.3. The Vaidurya-ser-po

The main facts we learn from the *Vaidurya-ser-po* with regards to the chronology of the temples of Tsaparang are the following three points.

1. the monasteries of Breden and Lötang⁶⁰ were built at Tsaparang as summer and winter accommodation equal in size, during the reign of King Phun-tshogs-lde⁶¹ by a man called Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsondu^{62, 63};
2. later - when Chögyal Buddha's son Lobsang Rabten and the venerable Ngawang Dragpa spread the Geluk tradition in Guge⁶⁴ - queen Dondrubma⁶⁵ erected the Red Temple;
3. the white temple⁶⁶ and the Yamantaka temple⁶⁷ were built by three grandsons or great-grandsons⁶⁸ [of Lobsang Rabten and Dondrubma], one of whom was called Jigten Wangchuk⁶⁹, during the lifetime of Gendun Gyatso (1475-1542)⁷⁰;

⁶⁰ *bre ldan* and *blos stangs* (The Lötang or Loteng is known under nine different names: *Blos stang*, *Blo stang*, *Blo tang*, *Blo steng*, *Blo stengs*, *Blos btang*, *Bkra shis bde rgyas*, *Bkra shis bde rgyas gling* and *Bkra shis dge rgyas gling gtsug lag khang*. For the purpose of readability I will use *Blos btang*, transcribed as Lötang, because *Blos btang* means 'renunciation'. Loteng, a transcription of *Blo steng*, meaning 'a roof above the mind' would be my second choice."Steng" was a common ending of Tibetan monastery names in the 15th century; for example in *Lhun grub steng*, another name for the Dergé Gönchen, founded in 1448.

⁶¹ His full name: *Khri Nam mkha'i dbang po Phun tshogs lde*

⁶² *ha se 'phags pa ye shes brtson 'grus*, also spelled: *Hwra 'tse 'phags pa ye shes brtson 'grus*

⁶³ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.2 and 222.3

⁶⁴ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 221.21 and 222.1

⁶⁵ *don grub ma*, king Lobsang Rabten's wife

⁶⁶ *mchod khang dkar po*

⁶⁷ *'jigs byed lha khang*

⁶⁸ The *Vaidurya-ser-po* can be interpreted in two ways: Lobsang Rabten and Dondrubma probably had one son, Phags palha, who had two sons called Shakya Od and Shakya Rinchen, or Lobsang Rabten and Dondrubma had three sons Phags palha, Shakya Od and Shakya Rinchen. We therefore do not know if Jigten Wangchuk, who was Shakya Rinchen's son, was Lobsang Rabten and Dondrubma grandson or great-grandson, as is elaborately explained in Vitali 1996 : 513 n. 869

⁶⁹ *'jig rten dbang phyug*

⁷⁰ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.5 - 222.8

Additional pivotal information the *Vaidurya-ser-po* provides is, that the Lötang monastery had towards the end of the 17th century about sixty monks⁷¹.

4.1 The real white temple

Since the article *Tibetan Notes* was published in 1949, the temple called the 'White Temple' by Tucci was attributed to Jigten Wangchuk and thought to have been built during the lifetime of Dalai Lama II, thus between 1475 and 1542. And, since the temple would have been built before king Jigten Wangchuk financed a large college for Gelukpa monks near Tsethang in central Tibet, the date was fixed to around 1540⁷².

I will not question this date. The temple named the *mchod khang dkar po* in the *Vaidurya-ser-po*, built around 1540, however does not seem to be the building called 'The White Temple' today: it is the current Tara Temple instead. Evidence lies in the wall paintings of the temples:

1. the Tara Temple contains a portrait of Lhatsun Sherab Ozer, the son of Jigten Wangchuk⁷³ and
2. the paintings in the Tara Temple share many stylistic similarities with the paintings in the Yamantaka temple⁷⁴ that was built by Jigten Wangchuk⁷⁵ (together with the *mchod khang dkar po*).
3. The paintings in these two relatively small temples are among the latest at Tsaparang⁷⁶.

Tucci did not write anything about the temple currently called the Tara Temple⁷⁷. The Govindas did not mention it either. The building was apparently not recognized as a temple by western visitors in the first half of the 20th century. The first western travelers in the 1980's, Aschoff and Chan, reported that the color of the outer walls had faded and that the murals in the Tara Temple were nearly completely blackened by fire and smoke (figs 10, 11, 12). Aschoff and Chan do not say what is obvious: this temple has been lived in, dwellers have made fire inside for cooking and heating. Thanks to cleaning and renovation work, Aschoff was able to distinguish and photograph an inscription identifying the depiction of Jigten Wangchuk's son Sherab Ozer during his second visit in 1987⁷⁸.

⁷¹ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.19 - 222.20

⁷² Petech 1997 : 246 and Tropper 2013 : 51

⁷³ Aschoff 1997 : 115. That Lhatsun Sherab Ozer is the son of Jigten Wangchuk is stated in the *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.8

⁷⁴ Van Ham : 360

⁷⁵ *Vaidurya-ser-po* 222.6 and 222.7

⁷⁶ Van Ham

⁷⁷ Aschoff 1989 : 114

⁷⁸ Aschoff 1989 : 115 and 136. The inscription was translated Deborah Klimburg-Salter on Aschoff's request



fig. 10



fig. 11



fig.12

fig 10, 11 & 12: the current Tara Temple, a shrine built around 1540 by king Jigten Wangchuk and his brothers, called the *mchod khang dkar po*, the white temple. The wall paintings are blackened by fire and smoke; the temple was desecrated and lived in by the *dzongpon* and his substitutes . fig 10 before 1986, the other two thereafter. On fig 12, the lama in the middle is Sherab Ozer, the son of king Jigten Wangchuk (Pictures courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)

The answer to the question who lived in this house when Tucci and the Govindas visited the place, can be found in the works of these authors. Govinda reported that the shepherd who acted as the custodian of the temples at Tsaparang, lived in a cave. The districts governor, on the other hand, the *dzongpon* of Tsaparang, used "a modest building as temporary headquarters at Tsaparang"⁷⁹ when he came from his main residence in Shangsha on an official tour for inspection and tax collecting once or twice a year. Govinda reports that a relative of the *dzongpon*, a nun, was living temporarily in that house during their visit and Tucci reported that a Tibetan official, acting as the substitute for the *dzongpon*, was managing his 'temporary headquarters'⁸⁰. This official must have prevented Tucci from entering the 'Tara Temple': the *mchod khang dkar po*. If Tucci would have entered, he would probably have noticed - in spite of the blackness of the walls - that its frescoes shared stylistic similarities with the murals in the Yamantaka temple and he would probably have noticed the portrait of king Jigten Wangchuk's son Sherab Ozer, too.

4.2 The Breden and Löthang Monasteries

If we assume that the *mchod khang dkar po*, the white temple, mentioned in the Vaidurya-ser-po, is the building called the Tara Temple today, under which name and description did the present day 'White Temple' then appear in the Vaidurya-ser-po?

We will commence our search for answers with the clues Tucci provided, reporting that this temple contained painted figures which were nearer to Indian models than the images in the other temples at Tsaparang, and that the Tsongkhapa sculpture of clay in this temple seemed to be later than the Buddhas of clay in the same hall, indicating that the temple had initially been built in another tradition and turned into a Gelukpa institution later. We will therefore start our search for answers within the information the textual sources provide about the earliest building activities at Tsaparang. The first temples at Tsaparang mentioned in the Vaidurya-ser-po, were the monasteries of Breden and Lötang⁸¹, built during the reign of King Phun-tshogs-Ide. King Phun-tshogs-Ide ruled from 1424⁸² until he took monastic vows in the Sakya Ngor tradition in 1436⁸³. According to Vitali his wedding was presided over by the Gelukpa lama Ngawang Dragpa, but this must have been the Sakya lama Lhotsawa Ngawang Dragpa, one of the royal preceptors of the king of Mangyul Gungthang⁸⁴, who

⁷⁹ Govinda 1960 : 241

⁸⁰ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 182

⁸¹ (dit is ook note ca.100) The Lötang/Loteng is known under nine different names: Blo stang, Blo stang, Blo tang, Blo steng, Blo stengs, Blo stang, Bkra shis bde rgyas, Bkra shis bde rgyas gling and Bkra shis dge rgyas gling gtsug lag khang. According to Vitali, some of the variants might be scribal errors. Blo steng could mean: above (steng) a bulging earthen mound (blo). Blo stang means renunciation (Vitali 2012 : 197 n118).

⁸² He married and ascended the throne in 1424

⁸³ Heimbel 2017 : 297

⁸⁴ This king, Khri Sonam Ide (1370-1440) was married to a princess from Guge, probably an aunt of Phun-tshogs-Ide, a sister of his father

sojourned mNga'ris (Guge) with a large entourage in the mid 1420's⁸⁵.

Could the temple presently called the 'White Temple' originally have been built as a part of the Breden or Lötang Monasteries? The Breden was the monastic complex at the top of the Tsaparang hill⁸⁶. This complex and the royal palace were connected, a common phenomenon on the Tibetan plateau⁸⁷. Today only ruins of monks quarters, a large square, an assembly hall and a protector temple in a cave⁸⁸ remain of the Breden. The temple which is one of the main shrines at Tsaparang, the Mandala Temple on the peak, seems not to have been part of the Breden Monastery, but of the royal palace instead, and it seems to have been established around 1440, slightly later than the Breden Monastery proper, as will be discussed in a subsequent study⁸⁹.

The identification of the Lötang Monastery is the decisive point with regards to establishing the foundation date of the 'White Temple'. Tucci identified as the Lotang dGonpa (monastery) the small separate temple complex a couple of hundred meter northeast of the Tsaparang peak, and to my knowledge all other authors on Tsaparang until now have followed his lead⁹⁰. I doubt however, if this is correct. I suggest that the current 'White Temple' of Tsaparang was called the main temple (Tsuglagkhang) of the Lötang Monastery in the Vaidurya-ser-po.

The Vaidurya-ser-po reveals that the Lötang monastery had about sixty monks towards the end of the 17th century⁹¹. This number of monks would not have fitted in the eighty square meters of the present Lötang monastery temple across the little stream and there is no indication that this temple was larger in the past. The only two temples at Tsaparang which have the capacity for sixty monks are the Red Temple and the 'White Temple'. They both have an assembly hall (*dukhang*) over three hundred square meters in size: these two temples seem to have been the main temples of the Lötang Monastery, not a small temple with a typical 11th floorplan standing apart from the rest.

4.3 The Red Temple

The Red Temple at Tsaparang was obviously built after 1440, as its mural paintings were clearly made by artists who were trained in Gyantse in the 1430's⁹². Especially the depictions of Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, White Tara, Green Tara, Pratisara, Ushnishavijaya and, as gatekeepers, Hayagriva and

⁸⁵ Heimbrel 2017 : 276

⁸⁶ Petech 1997 : 254 n.85

⁸⁷ The Potala Palace housed the Namgyal monastery, the dzongs in Bhutan house district administration and monasteries

⁸⁸ this temple is not mentioned in western literature, but I visited it in 2002 and Peter van Ham provided me pictures of it, taken by Lionel Fournier

⁸⁹ A study on the Tholing Assembly Hall, the Mandala Temple and the Red Temple at Tsaparang by the present author, forthcoming

⁹⁰ Even Gyalpo 2006

⁹¹ Vaidurya-ser-po 222.19 – 222.20

⁹² Ricca 1997 : 198

Vajrapani at the eastern wall are particularly fine examples of the Gyantse school, perfect examples of the "fully mature Tibetan art", that was developed by a group of Tibetan master artists and their students while working under the inspiring leadership of Chögyal Rabten Kunsang, the prince of Gyantse, and Rinchen Peldrub, the abbot of Nyenying, at the Tashi Gomang Chörten, the Kumbum in the Pelkor Chöde monastery at Gyantse. Fully mature Tibetan art means a variety of styles in which Indian, Newar and Chinese influences are mastered and integrated. At the Kumbum in Gyantse twenty-nine master painters with their teams of assistants were working cooperatively⁹³ in the 1430's⁹⁴. This 'school' or better 'cooperation' of master painters and students, will have delivered its first accomplished students around 1440. The murals in the Red Temple at Tsaparang are among the best examples outside Gyantse of the achievements of this school: the depictions of the bodhisattvas and gatekeepers at the east wall of The Red Temple seem to have been made by artists who had just 'graduated' from their education at the Gyantse Kumbum. It therefore seems that the Red Temple at Tsaparang was built in the 1440's, not in the 1470's, and surely also not between 1424 and 1436 as this temple does not contain any painted figure that seems to have been executed before 1440.

5. The Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang

The 'White Temple' of Tsaparang on the other hand, could have been built between 1424 and 1436. Its iconographic program is dedicated to the various Vairocana cycles of the Yoga-Tantras, themes which were ubiquitous on the entire Tibetan plateau until around 1440⁹⁵. The cosmic Buddha Vairocana had been subject of special devotion in Central Tibet from the 8th century on⁹⁶ and Vairocana images had been the centerpiece of many temples in Guge in the 11th century (i.g. Tholing, Tabo, Lhalung)⁹⁷. In the course of the 15th century the Yoga Tantra teachings however lost their importance⁹⁸ in the wake of the spread of the Geluk tradition⁹⁹. The Vairocana cycles were major iconographic themes still in 14th century temples at Sakya and Zhalu as well as in the Tsuglagkhang of the Pelkhor Chöde completed in 1425, in the Ngor monastery, founded in 1429 and in the Kumbum of Gyantse, completed around 1440. In later monuments the cosmic Buddha Vairocana tends to play a much less conspicuous role. The dominant presence of Vairocana in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, where six to nine of the original eighteen Buddha sculptures of clay sitting in lotus

⁹³ under the guidance of Rabten Kunsang (the chögyal of Gyantse) and Rinchen Peldrub, the abbot of Nyenying

⁹⁴ Ricca 1997 : 196

⁹⁵ Vairocana cycles of the Yoga Tantras were very prominently present in the Ngor monastery built in 1429, the Tsuklak Khang of the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde, completed in 1425 and in the 14th century temples of Sakya and Zhwalu.

⁹⁶ Kapstein 2006 : 91

⁹⁷ Luczanits 2004 : 7

⁹⁸ Luczanits 2004 : 7

⁹⁹ Tsongkhapa regarded the Yoga Tantra practice as being less beneficial than the practice of the Anuttarayoga tantras, see Heimbel 2017 : 225

posture on pedestals along the walls, were depictions of Vairocana¹⁰⁰, could be an indication that this temple was built before 1440 and thus be: the first temple of the Lötang Monastery.

5.1 Influences from Gyantse

Another indication of the foundation date of this temple, is given precisely by these over life size Vairocana sculptures of painted clay along the sides. They are extremely beautiful. I have never seen more feminine, elegant, delicate, sophisticated, strong, soft Buddha faces in my entire life. They are unique; the only sculptures that come anywhere near their beauty, are the sculptures of the Yarlung kings, bodhisattva's and Buddhist masters in the Pelkhor Chöde in Gyantse, which were made in 1423¹⁰¹ (fig 19). The resemblance of the beautiful statues in the Pelkhor Chöde and those in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang could be fortuitous, but it is more likely that that the sculptures were made by the same group of artists in the same time span. The Buddhas of clay are fixed to the wall and form a whole with the painted figures surrounding them, their mandala or cycle, meaning that they cannot have been inserted later: these Buddhas in lotus position along the walls of the temple date back to its foundation time.

Apart from Buddhas of clay, the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, also used to contain three very large gilt copper images: an about four meter high seated Sakyamuni flanked by two standing bodhisattvas¹⁰², which seemed to have been half size copies of the gilt copper images of Sakyamuni, Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara in the main sanctum of the Tsuglagkhang of the Pelkhor Chöde of Gyantse cast in 1422. The metal sculptures at Tsaparang were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but the almost twice as big originals in Gyantse can still be seen today. The similarities underline the strong connection between Gyantse and Tsaparang in the 15th century. The images at Tsaparang could have been made by image makers from Gyantse in the 1420's, but they could also have been made later and inserted in the temple in the course of a major renovation.

5.2 'Indian' influences

A strong indication of the founding period of this temple is given by hundreds of miniscule painted figures, which are 'close to Indian models'¹⁰³, for example the many "gods, spirits and demons of the vast pan-Indian tradition, conceived in terms of the vast concourse of the beings of all stages of spiritual progress who are described as listening to the teachings of Manjugosha, incorporated in the

¹⁰⁰ Seven images of Vairocana have been identified with certainty, three could be either depictions of Vairocana or depictions of similar deities

¹⁰¹ Henss 2014 : 519

¹⁰² Photographed by Tucci. Tucci 1935/89 : Tav. XCIX, C and CI

¹⁰³ Tucci 1935/89 :

Dharmadhatu-vagishvara-manjushri mandala,"¹⁰⁴ slightly right from the middle on the west wall of the temple. The influence of the Indian manner was very powerful in these paintings¹⁰⁵. Tucci noticed that these miniatures were "nearest to Indian models" [compared to the paintings in the other temples of Tsaparang], and that "they are 'Indian' for the accuracy of execution, the delicacy of drawing, lightness of movements, and for those chiaroscuro (light and shade effects)."¹⁰⁶ Figures would be depicted in half profile rather than frontal, wherever the iconographic scheme allowed it,¹⁰⁷ and the techniques these wall paintings were made by, revealed the involvement of illuminators of manuscripts Tucci found in a cave near Tholing.¹⁰⁸

These observations lead to the conclusion that the artists who created the small figures in the Vairocana and Dharmadathu cycles in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, did not attend the 'School of Gyantse', which proves that this temple could have been built before 1440. Its painters or probably the teachers of these painters were apparently Indian.

The color palette is brighter than the more saturated tints applied by the painters of the Gyantse school. It is composed of an unusual bright shade of red, navy blue, light blue and almond white as the dominating tones, with a minimal percentage of yellow and green. The same color palette was applied in the Soma Temple in Alchi, that is attributed to the 14th century¹⁰⁹. I have not yet seen this color pallet in other places. The resemblance could be fortuitous, but the ceilings of 'the White Temple' are also distantly related to the ceilings of another temple at Alchi, the Sumstek. The cedar wood panels are in in both cases decorated with a wide variety of textile patterns.

It is undisputed that the wooden planks and pillars in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang were imported from Lhadakh, Spiti or Garhwal , as in Guge trees providing this kind of wood did not grow. The particular patterns and colors seem to point at Ladakh as place of origin, the area queen Trisam Gyelmo came from, too, in 1424, to marry Phun-tshogs-lde.

5.3 Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsonдру

Thus, in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang elements from Ladakh seem to have been combined with elements from the Tsuglagkhang in the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde. This temple could have been built between 1424 and 1436. The Vaidurya-ser-po conveys that the Lötang was the titular see at

¹⁰⁴ Van Ham 2016 : 44

¹⁰⁵ Tucci 35/89, p. 120

¹⁰⁶ Tucci 1935, pp. 8, 9

¹⁰⁷ Tucci 8

¹⁰⁸ Tucci 1935/89, 119 Tucci is referring to manuscripts he found in an abandoned temple near Tholing

¹⁰⁹ The style is not similar, only the color palette, the pigments and percentages of the colors in the combination corresponds



fig 13. Ceilings with textile patterns in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang (Picture courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)

Tsaparang, accommodating about 60 monks¹¹⁰ towards the end of the 17th century. I suggest that the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, was called the Lötang in the Vaidurya-ser-po. The Lötang, also called the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang, was built as one of the earliest structures at Tsaparang, during the reign of Phunstog De who ascended the throne in 1424 and abdicated, taking monastic vows, in 1436¹¹¹.

According to the Vaidurya-ser-po the Lötang was built, together with the Breden, by a man called Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsonдру¹¹², who was a native of Guge, a scion of a powerful ancient local family¹¹³. Hase Phagpa was a Buddhist master with magical powers who discovered an underground jewel mine¹¹⁴ and who "made many receptacles of body, speech and mind at the *Bkra shis dge rgyas gling gtsug lag khang*"¹¹⁵ (the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang).

¹¹⁰ Vaidurya-ser-po 222.20

¹¹¹ Hembel 2017 : 296

¹¹² Vaidurya-ser-po 221.22

¹¹³ Vitali 2012 : 199 The Bro clan. The Bro clan was de facto ruling western Tibet in the 9th century and facilitated the founding of the Guge kingdom by giving the first king of Guge, a descendent from the Tibetan kings of the Yarlung dynasty, a lady out of their midst as bride.

¹¹⁴ This is stated in the *chos 'byung mkhas pa'l 'phrog*, (the enchanting, intelligent religious history) written in 1606 by *Zhang zhung pa dPal 'byor bzang po* (1552-1606) (Vitali 2012 : 181) The discovery of the jewel mine might have added to the resources for funding the temple, besides gold mining and trade which were the main sources of income in Guge.

¹¹⁵ The Lötang/Loteng is known under nine different names: *Blos stang*, *Blo stang*, *Blo tang*, *Blo steng*, *Blo stengs*, *Blos btang*, *Bkra shis bde rgyas*, *Bkra shis bde rgyas gling* and *Bkra shis dge rgyas gling gtsug lag khang*.

5.4 Queen Trisam Gyälmo

It is not yet been stated in the literature for as far as I know, but it seems that queen Trisam Gyälmo, *khri lcam gyälmo*, the Ladakhi queen of Phun-tshogs-Ide (1409-1480)¹¹⁶ was involved in the realization of the Lötang (the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang). When she came to Tsaparang in 1424 to marry the prince of Guge, she seems to have brought building material¹¹⁷ and craftsmen with her, as was customary in the 15th century in this region¹¹⁸. She seems to have brought cedar wood ceiling planks and pillars, and pigments and artists from Ladakh. A foundational scene, depicted on a mural in the *drangkhang* (cella) of the Lötang shows people carrying wooden pillars and planks, together with many monks, lay practitioners, dancers, musicians and acrobats, led by a Sakya *lama* who is riding a white horse. This lama looks a bit like Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) and Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382 – 1456), but, as the first lived a couple of centuries earlier and the latter never traveled to Guge, it is probably a depiction of Lotsawa Ngawang Dragpa¹¹⁹, the Sakya Lama who presided over the wedding and coronation ceremonies of Phun-tshogs-Ide and Trisam Gyälmo in 1424¹²⁰.

Queen Trisam Gyälmo was an educated Buddhist who, according to the Ngari Chronicle, made a large patchwork thangka showing Sakyamuni with open eyes^{121, 122}. This thangka was almost certainly made in Gyantse, which was the main (and probably even exclusive) center in Tibet for fabricating applique thangkas in the first half of the 15th century. The first large patchwork thangka in Tibet had been fabricated in Gyantse in 1360 and in the first two decades of the 15th century, at least four large patchwork thangkas were made here¹²³.

According to Vitali, some of the variants might be scribal errors. *Blos steng* could mean: above (*steng*) a bulging earthen mound (*blos*). *Blos btang* means renunciation (Vitali 2012 : 197 n118).

¹¹⁶ Phunstog De was This marriage was probably arranged by Phun-tshogs-Ide's father Namgyal De, who led troops to Ladakh in 1399 to quell a rebellion for a befriended king.

¹¹⁷ The pillars and ceiling are of cedar wood, and cedars do not grow in Guge

¹¹⁸ In early 15th century Hunza, craftsmen from Baltistan who came with a Balti queen bride, renovated two forts. This information was provided by the librarian/curator of the Baltit Fort in Karimabad, Hunza, Pakistan, Mr. Ejazullah Baig, in a letter dated 17.09.1999. Queen brides who brought craftsmen along were of course already common in 7th century Tibet.

¹¹⁹ The Ngawang Dragpa who presided over Puntsog De's wedding was an illustrious lama who traveled with a huge entourage through Guge around 1424 (Heimbel p. 276)

¹²⁰ or Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382 – 1456), in whose the presence king Phun-tshogs-Ide took monastic vows in 1436.

¹²¹ Vitali 1996 : 133 Mnga'ris rgyal rabs last page (Vitali 1996 : 84)

¹²² The over four meter high gilt copper Sakyamuni image which stood in the 'White Temple'/Tashi Deygeling Tsuglagkhang had wide open eyes to, as we see on a picture by Tucci (Tucci 1935/89 : TAV. C) (just like the Sakyamuni images in the Sakya Monastery)

¹²³ Henss 2014 : 511

Queen Trisam Gyelmo exchanged letters with the leading Buddhist master of her time, Khedrubje, and personally invited him to come to Guge¹²⁴. Khedrubje was abbot of the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde in the years 1421-1426¹²⁵, when the main temple of the monastery, the Tsuglagkhang, was being built. Construction and decoration work on this temple was completed in 1425¹²⁶.

Queen Trisam Gyelmo traveled to Narthang to receive an initiation¹²⁷. As Narthang is an almost two month journey away from Guge, and Gyantse only a four days journey from Narthang, I assume that the queen visited Gyantse to see the new Tsuglagkhang of the Pelkor Chöde, one of the most impressive monuments in Tibet, which had been completed one year after her marriage. Queen Trisam Gyelmo was a Buddhist teacher herself, who introduced a certain meditation technique in Guge¹²⁸.

The sculptors who worked at the Tsuglagkhang in Gyantse seem to have come to Tsaparang to make images for the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang (the 'White Temple') in cooperation with craftsmen and artists from Ladakh under the supervision of Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsondu. The ceilings painted with the fabulous textile patterns and the numerous small paintings of pan-Indian figures seem to have been made by Ladakhi artists and the Buddha sculptures of clay in the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang /Lötang Temple seem to have been made by the same team of sculptors who made similar sculptures in the Pelkor Chöde. Stylistic differences between the images in Gyantse and Tsaparang can be retraced too influence from the famous 10th-11th century metal sculptures from Kashmir, which were highly revered in Guge in the 15th century¹²⁹ such as the bronze Avalokiteshvara Padmapani made by the Indian sculptor Bhidhaka in 998¹³⁰ and the silver statues of the Khachar three brothers¹³¹. The image makers from Gyantse seem to have been inspired by these Kashmiri sculptures when created the elegant Vairocana and other Buddha's in the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang, giving them Kashmiri features such as beautiful elongated straight slit eyes and exotic garments , for example bustiers .

¹²⁴ Vitali 1996 : 512 n 867. Trisam Gyelmo signed the invitation letter to Khedrubje and exchanged other letters with him (mKhas.grub.rje gSung.'bum vol. Ta f.20a and 88b; Petech "Ya-ts'e Gu-ge Pu-rang: a new study p. 102-103) Khedrubje declined the invitation

¹²⁵ Vitali 1996 : 512 n 868

¹²⁶ Ricca & Lo Bue 1993 : 20, 22. In 1429 Khedrubje was abbot of Nenyng, a few days walk south of Gyantse. The abbots of Nenyng were the main architects of the monuments in Gyantse: the Pelkhor Chöde and the Kumbum

¹²⁷ Petech 1997 : 254 n. 83 . Ladakh is about 500 kilometers from Guge and Narthang almost 800 km

¹²⁸ Trisam Gyelmo is credited for having introduced the system of *Nye lam gyi thugs dam* ("direct path meditation") in Guge (Vitali 2012 : 154).

¹²⁹ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : plate facing p. 182

¹³⁰ Pritzker 1999 : 133. For other 10th-11th century Kashmiri bronzes in Guge see Von Schroeder, 2008 : 17, 21, 60, 61; Heller, 2008: 31

¹³¹ Vitali 1996 : 133 n. 191

The iconographic themes in the Lötang Temple, the Vairocana cycles of the Yoga-Tantras and the royal lineages, are also dominant in the Pelkhor Chöde, where the Vajradathu Mandala Lhakhang of the Tsuglagkhang on the ground floor is devoted to Sarvavid Vairocana¹³². The Lötang Temple was the titular see of Tsaparang¹³³. The Vaidurya-ser-po lists its abbots from the 15th century until around 1696¹³⁴.

6 The Jampa Lhakhang

The small monastic ensemble about 350 meter northeast of Tsaparang's peak was however baptized by Tucci the *Lothang dgonpa* in his book on Tsaparang in 1935, and is still generally called 'Lötang temple or monastery' today. Tucci identified this structure initially as an 11th century temple associated with the translator Rin-chen-bzang-po – the Lotsava. In 1949 however, when Tucci discovered the Vaidurya-ser-po, he decided that this ensemble must be the *Lötang dgonpa* founded during the reign of Phun-tshogs-lde, a temple dating back to the early 15th century, the titular see of Tsaparang. And this assumption was fostered by Tibetologists ever since. At the time of Lama Anagorika Govinda's visit in 1948, this temple was however called the Jampa Lhakhang, Chamba Lhakhang or Maitreya Temple¹³⁵.

From the diary-based book "Secrets of Tibet", we learn how this monastic ensemble got its name. Tucci and his retinue arrived at Tholing a couple of days before they continued to Tsaparang. At Tholing Tucci noticed that the history of this area was completely forgotten. The monks were illiterate except for one not-native *geshe*, and the abbot and administrator of the monastery had no knowledge regarding the history of Guge and the temples at Tsaparang¹³⁶.

In 1933, on September the 22th, in the afternoon, Tucci and his team arrived at Tsaparang, where they camped near the temple Tucci would call the *Lothang dgonpa* the next day¹³⁷. It was the first temple they visited the next morning. A monk from Tholing who brought the keys had written down this name: *blo thang lha khang*. This monk told Tucci that the usually accepted tradition in the whole region was, that this was the temple of the Lotsava (the Great Translator). Tucci remarks: "the fact that almost all the temples built by Rin-chen-bzang-po are in the planes and the very figure of the

¹³² Henss 2014 : 515

¹³³ Petech 1997 : 254 n. 85

¹³⁴ Vidurya-ser-po

¹³⁵ Govinda

¹³⁶ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 159

¹³⁷ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 171

temple does not allow me to doubt the truth of this tradition". The temple shows the characteristic plan of the chapels built during the first dynasty of Guge, with atrium and niche...¹³⁸

Thus Tucci initially, in 1933/35, identifies the temple as an 11th century structure, associated with Rin-chen-bzang-po, with wall-paintings of a much later period. He identifies the main statue, an over life size clay sculpture, as a depiction of Vairocana¹³⁹, which is peculiar, as the remnants of this Buddha statue clearly show that it had pendant legs (fig 16), indicating that this image depicts the future Buddha, Maitreya, Jamba. The latter tallies with the name the temple had in 1948: Chamba Lhakang¹⁴⁰.

Tucci changed his mind in 1949 when he discovered the Vaidurya-ser-po. According to this late 17th century text, the *blo thang* was a monastery, built during the reign of Phun-tshogs-Ide, thus between 1424 and 1436. The discovery of the Vaidurya-ser-po changed Tucci's view on this small temple apart from the others, apart from the peak of Tsaparang: instead of his initial identification as a 11th century temple, he identifies this separate temple as the early 15th century Löthang Monastery from now on...

From Tucci's description of the situation at Tholing we gather, that the monk who had the name *blo thang lha khang* written down, did not know anything about Tsaparang. The name *blo thang lha khang* could just as well have been the name of the entire monastic ensemble, the entire monastery, or the name of totally different temple, for example the one Tucci baptized the 'White Temple', as the monk had no idea where the name someone had written down for him referred to. He just showed this name to Tucci at the beginning of their visit of the entirety of temples at Tsaparang. It was probably a coincidence that this temple 350 meter northeast of the peak begot this name. And this temple is still called Lötang Monastery today.

After visiting this temple Tucci walked straight to the building he calls the 'White Temple', as we read in "Secrets of Tibet". He walks past the present day 'Tara Temple' without noticing it in 1933 and, as he does not mention this temple either in the book he published just after his second visit to Tsaparang in 1935, we must conclude that he never set foot in it. Therefore, Tucci did not see that the paintings in this temple share many stylistic similarities with the paintings in the Yamantaka temple and he did not see the portrait of Lhatsun Sherab Ozer, the son of Jigten Wangchuk, which reveals that the this temple was built in the 16th century. Tucci missed the real *mchod khang dkar po*, the white temple, at Tsaparang.

¹³⁸ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 173

¹³⁹ Tucci & Gershi 1935 : 173

¹⁴⁰ Govinda



fig

14. From the roof of the Tashi Deyeling Tsuglagkhang one sees the Red building across the stream marked with a red arrow: the Jampa Lhakhang (currently called the Lötang Monastery)



fig 15. The Jampa Lhakhang/Lötang Monastery in 1994 (Picture courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)



fig 16. Remnants of a Maitreya statue in the Jampa Lhakhang/Lötang Monastery, 2002 (Courtesy of Craig Lovell of Mical Skikorsky Alamy stock, ref. nr. HJNJX6)

7. Later Renovations

Tucci described the 'White Temple' as the most beautiful temple he ever visited in Western Tibet, "the real royal temple where the pious dynasty had profusely bestowed its riches and shown its munificence"¹⁴¹. His awe is understandable if one keeps in mind that Tucci had not yet visited Central Tibet, when he came to Tsaparang. He did not notice that the sculptures in Tsaparang shared many similarities with those in the Pelkhor Chöde, because he had not visited Gyantse yet¹⁴². The triad of a four meter high gilt-copper image of Sakyamuni¹⁴³ with gilt-copper bodhisattvas standing on either side¹⁴⁴ which used to adorn the *drangkhang* (cella)¹⁴⁵ shared many similarities with the main statues in the Tsuglagkhang of the Pelkhor Chöde, made in 1421 by the sculptor sKyabs-pa¹⁴⁶. The even more special clay sculptures in this temple, the extraordinary beautiful over life size Buddha's along the walls of the assembly hall, share similarities with the clay sculptures in the

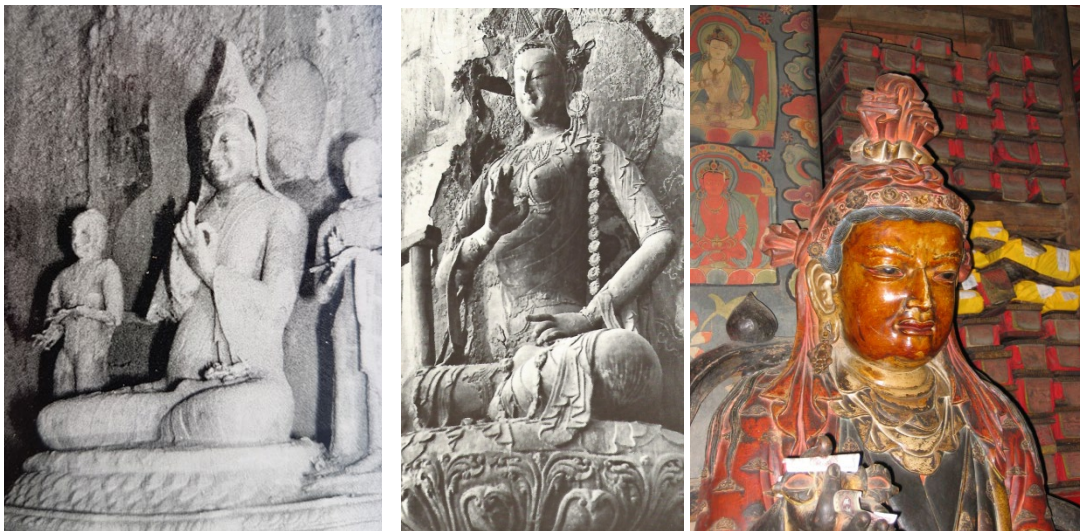


fig 17. Sculptures of Tsongkhapa and two disciples (Picture courtesy of G. Tucci, 1935)

fig 18. Sculpture of Tara; earlier then the Tsongkhapa according to Tucci (Picture courtesy of Li Gotami, 1948)

fig 19. Sculpture in the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde Tsuglagkhang (depicting one of the Yarlung kings), made in 1423 (acc. to Henss 2014 : 519) The only sculptures in Tibet which are comparable in quality with the sculptures in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang

¹⁴¹ Tucci 1935/1989 : 112

¹⁴² Tucci would visit Gyantse for the first time in 1937

¹⁴³ See pictures Tucci 1935/89 TAV, XCIX, C, CI and CII

¹⁴⁴ According to Tucci: Maitreya and Manjushri. Tucci 1935/98 : 125

¹⁴⁵ The gilt-copper statues at Tsaparang, photographed in 1948 by Li Gotami Govinda, were destroyed in the 1950's or '60's. The statues in Gyantse still exist (Henss 2015 : 514, fig 740 (picture 1910, Leslie Weir).

¹⁴⁶ Ricca & Lo Bue 1993 : 21

Pelkhor Chöde in Gyantse, made around 1422¹⁴⁷, too¹⁴⁸. Sculptures of clay are a common feature in central Tibetan and Western Himalayan temples from the 11th century until around 1440. The art of making beautiful sculptures of clay for Tibetan temples started to decline around 1430.

7.1. Tsongkhapa sculpture

Tucci noticed that the triad of Tsongkhapa and two disciples (fig 17)¹⁴⁹ at the northern wall of the temple next to the *cella*, was of a later date than the clay sculptures of Budhhas in the temple¹⁵⁰. This seems to show that this temple was originally built before or around 1430, when the art of clay image making in Tibet was at its peak, in one of the other Tibetan Buddhist traditions (Sakya or Kagyu for example) and that it was turned into a Geluk institution later. The clay image of the founder of the Geluk tradition, an image of lesser artistic quality, must have been inserted when the Yellow sect became prevalent in Guge, and this temple seem to have been built before that time.

7.2 The gatekeepers

What Tucci did not notice is, that the statues of the doorkeepers, Hayagriva and Vajrapani, and the paintings on the wall behind them, also seem to be of later date than the Vairocana cycles which dominate the rest of the temple. These statues of protectors and the paintings at their back are clear exponents of the Gyantse school¹⁵¹, discussed above, and were probably executed in the 1440's. The entrance of this temple seems to have been broader originally. The doorway seems to have been reduced and the doorkeepers seem to have been inserted a couple of years after the temple had been founded. This is my own observation, I have not read this in any work focusing on Tsaparang yet.

8. Special features

8.1 Mandala's

Of the eighteen Buddha sculptures of clay in lotus posture on pedestals along the walls of 'the White Temple', six to nine were depictions of Vairocana¹⁵². Of the images other than Vairocana, Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya have been identified with certainty, and the remaining statues were

¹⁴⁷ Ricca & Lo Bue 1993 : 21 and Henss 2014 : 519

¹⁴⁸ The sculptures in Tsaparang have a slightly more graceful appearances and slightly more amiable faces

¹⁴⁹ Tucci 1935/89 Tav XCVIII (fig. 98)

¹⁵⁰ Tucci 1935/89 : 122

¹⁵¹ Own observation

¹⁵² Seven images of Vairocana have been identified with certainty, three could be either depictions of Vairocana or depictions of similar deities

probably depictions of Tara, Manjushri, Amithaba, Sakyamuni, Ratnasambhava and Amogasiddhi¹⁵³. A special sculpture (now destroyed) was an eight-armed Tantric form of the bodhisattva Manjushri, Manjugosha¹⁵⁴.

These sculptures are no isolated figures; they are connected with their surrounding retinues, consisting of dozens of small figures painted on the wall at their back. These are mandalas with a clay sculpture in the center, cycles which are described in Tantras: ancient Indian texts which have been translated in Tibetan from the second half of the 8th century on. In Tantric Buddhism practitioners, for example monks, visualize mandalas while reciting liturgical formulas, *sadhanas*, derived from Tantras. The Lötang (the 'White Temple') is embellished with mandalas based on the Vairochana-abisambodhi-tantra, the Sarva-tathagata-tattva-sanggraha-tantra, the Dharmadhatu-vagishvara-manjushri-tantra and probably other Tantras¹⁵⁵.

The cycles often consist of thirty-six figures around a central deity, and dozens of deities in addition to these basic figures. Particularly the Dharmadhatu-vagishvara-manjushri mandala can incorporate a large numbers of 'guest' divinities, representing assortments of gods, spirits and demons of the vast pan-Indian tradition, conceived in terms of the vast concourse of the beings of all stages of spiritual progress who are described as listening to the teachings of Manjugosha.¹⁵⁶

The enormous number of tiny figures based on the Vairochana-abisambodhi-tantra, the Sarva-tathagata-tattva-sanggraha-tantra, the Dharmadhatu-vagishvara-manjushri-tantra is a specialty of the 'White Temple' at Tsaparang and the Tholing Assembly Hall. In these two temples hundreds of small figures are painted at the walls. Tucci noticed with regards to these paintings that the influence of the Indian manner was very powerful¹⁵⁷. He noticed that these small paintings were "nearest to Indian models" [compared to the paintings in the other temples of Tsaparang]. The level of accuracy in the execution of the Indian deities, the delicateness of the style, the lightness of depicted movements and the use of light and shade effects reminded Tucci of the finest frescoes in India¹⁵⁸, where - just like here - figures would be depicted in half profile rather than frontal wherever the iconographic scheme allowed it¹⁵⁹.

Tucci regarded these small paintings as true miniatures¹⁶⁰, adding that the techniques and the drawings of some of the small figures in Tsaparang were identical to the illuminations of manuscripts

¹⁵³ Beck 2017 : 73

¹⁵⁴ Van Ham 2016 : 308 Tucci identified this deity as Sarvavid Vairocana, Tucci 1935/89 : TAV LXIII

¹⁵⁵ Van Ham 2016 : 42

¹⁵⁶ Van Ham 2016 : 44

¹⁵⁷ Tucci 35/89, p. 120

¹⁵⁸ Tucci 1935, pp. 8, 9

¹⁵⁹ Tucci 1935/89 : 126

¹⁶⁰ Tucci 1989 : 8

he found in a cave near Tholing, of which he thought that the came from the library of Toling¹⁶¹. Lama Anagarika Govinda¹⁶² who traced these frescoes on paper, reported that the details in these "gigantic" frescoes were minutely executed, "some miniatures not bigger than a thumb-nail (...) containing figures, complete in every detail, though only discernable through a magnifying glass"¹⁶³. The pan-Indian divinities, for example the elephant-headed Ganapati (Ganesha), Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Chandra, Agni, Lakshmi, Ishvara, Indra and Parvati can be found at the western wall of the Lötang, together with the Vajradathu deities and bodhisattva's of the Vairocana mandala proper.



fig 20. The foundational scenes in the "White Temple" / the Tashi Deyeling Tsuglagkhang. (Picture above courtesy of Jin Weinuo, 1991, under: courtesy of L. Fournier 1994)

¹⁶¹ Tucci 1935/89, 119 Tucci is referring to manuscripts he found in an abandoned temple near Tholing

¹⁶² See above

¹⁶³ Govinda 1960 : 237



fig 21



fig 22



fig 23

Figs 21 & 22 details from fig 20. The Sakya Lama on the horse in the foundation scene

fig 23: early depiction of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, detail of a picture a *thangka* in the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection, New York P1994.21.5 (derived from Jackson, 2010, fig 8.8; HAR (134))



fig 24. Detail of fig 20, monks in the foundation scene, debating. (Picture courtesy of Jin Weinuo, 1991)

8.2 The foundation scene

Tucci noticed that the depiction of the foundation scenes in the *cella* of the temple was already disfigured by water and in many places totally wiped out¹⁶⁴. He described it as a "pictorial

¹⁶⁴ Tucci 1935/89 : 125

remembrance of the festivities which had accompanied the foundation of the temple and the efforts that it cost”¹⁶⁵ and published three photographs of this painting¹⁶⁶. Tucci remarks that comparable paintings in the Red Temple at Tsaparang are better preserved. In the Red Temple we can see a consecration scene in which the royal family appears, caravans bringing construction materials and offerings and a community of lamas. In ‘the White Temple’, the consecration scene with the royal family has completely disappeared due to water leakage.

The surviving part of the painting shows over 230 figures, among whom the earlier mentioned Sakya lama on the horse. This lama seems to lead over thirty men and one yak carrying wooden planks and pillars, and among these porters are two bareheaded monks. A man walking right in front of the lama carries a huge metal cooking bowl on his back. Above the lama and the porters, thirty-five monks and thirty lay practitioners are depicted sitting in rows. About eight of these monks are portrayed bareheaded, the rest seem to wear yellow hats. Four of the monks are depicted debating (fig 24). Also depicted are dozens of dancers, acrobats and musicians, among which at least twelve trumpet blowers, people disguised as snow lions and monkeys and equestrians on jumping horses. Tucci focusses in his description on the festivities and characteristic games that celebrated the consecration of the Lötang Monastery.

These secular scenes remind of earlier paintings in temples in Ladakh: the foundation scene in the 14th century temple of Wanla for example, also shows actors or acrobats disguised as a lion, a monkey and a horse, equestrians on jumping horses and practitioners sitting in rows¹⁶⁷. In the 13th century Sumtsek of Alchi, musicians and riders on jumping horses are depicted on the *dhoti* of the main statue. These scenes, and also the famous royal drinking scene in Alchi¹⁶⁸ are obviously of an earlier date than this painting here, but secular festive scenes illuminating the situation around the foundation of temples are not common in temples in Central Tibet from the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. This kind of paintings is for example totally absent in Gyantse and Zwalu, which makes the presence of this festive scene in the Lötang Monastery another piece of evidence that the artists who executed them came from Ladakh.

The Sakya lama depicted here, who – as already mentioned - looks like Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, the lama king Phun-tshogs-lde took monastic vows with in 1436, but seems to be Lotsawa Ngawang Dragpa, the Sakya lama who presided over the marriage ceremony and coronation of king Phun-tshogs-lde and Trisam Gyelmo in 1424, is not reported on by Tucci. He does not write about it.

¹⁶⁵ Tucci 1935/89 : 126

¹⁶⁶ Tucci 1935/89 : plates CIII-CV

¹⁶⁷ Auer 2015 : 116 -118

¹⁶⁸ Van Ham 2018 : 39

Lotsawa Ngawang Dragpa sojourned in Ngari in the 1420's with a large entourage¹⁶⁹, a situation which seems to be depicted here.

9. Jigten Wangchuk

In spite of the facts that Vairocana cycles dominate the iconographic program and that a Sakya lama appears in the foundation scene, this temple is attributed to the 16th century king Jigten Wangchuk Pekar De, who was a follower of the Gelukpa tradition and supported the Drigung tradition as well, by restoring ancient hermitages near Mt. Kailash¹⁷⁰. King Jigten Wangchuk financed the construction of a large Gelukpa monk school in Central Tibet, the Ngari Dratsang¹⁷¹, near Tsethang in 1540. He traveled to central Tibet to visit the Dalai Lama III in Drepung, near Lhasa, twice: in 1546 and in 1555. He was a contemporary of Shantipa (1487-1556), who held the abbatial chairs of Tholing and Lötang (at Tsaparang) in the 1540's and founded two monasteries in Western Tibet: one at Dawadzong and one in Gro-sod, east of Mt. Kailash¹⁷². As Shantipa's biographers do not relate that a large, exceptional temple was built at Tsaparang, at the Lötang monastery he presided over as its abbot during his lifetime, we can safely assume that the majestic 'White Temple' of Tsaparang/the Lötang Temple was not built in the 16th century. The much smaller Tara Temple, built under the name *mchod khang dkar po* (white temple) by Jigten Wangchuk, will have been built before Shantipa ascended the abbatial chairs in Guge, which was in the 1540's.

In other words:

The Vaidurya-ser-po tells us that the white temple (*mchod khang dkar po*) and the Yamantaka temple were built by King Jigten Wangchuk. Tibetan sources narrating Shantipa's life and deeds, do not mention the fact that these temples were built, which shows, to my opinion, that the white temple mentioned in the Vaidurya-ser-po cannot be the large majestic building called the 'White Temple' today, because *if* a temple of this size and grandeur, with a typical 15th century iconographic program dominated by Vairocana cycles, was built during Shantipa's lifetime, his chroniclers would certainly have mentioned the event!

The paintings in the Yamantaka temple (temple of *rdo rje 'jigs byed*) and in the Tara Temple share many stylistic similarities: they are executed in the typical late "golden style" of Guge, with "lavish use of gold for the skin portions, serving the glorification of the depicted figures"¹⁷³. They are well balanced and symmetrical and the predominant colors in both temples are, apart from gold,

¹⁶⁹ Heimbels 2017 : 276

¹⁷⁰ Petech 1997 : 246

¹⁷¹ Vaidurya-ser-po 222.7 -222.8 In 1537 Jigten Wangchuk obtained a text from the Dalai Lama II

¹⁷² Petech 1980, p106 n. 94; In the Life of the 3rd Dalai Lama, p. 27

¹⁷³ Van Ham 2015 : 360

burgundy red and emerald green. Both temples are relatively small, the Yamantaka Temple measuring circa 7,5 by 10 meters, and the Tara is about half that size. In the Tara Temple about a dozen life size Buddhas and lamas are depicted, among whom Atisha and Tsongkhapa can be distinguished, as well a son of King Jigten Wangchuk, Lhatsun Sherab Özer¹⁷⁴. The latter is identified by an inscription. Under the portrait of Tsongkhapa, a not yet identified king and queen of Guge are depicted. I will leave the question if they are King Jigten Wangchuk and his queen open for a next study.



fig 25. The current Tara Temple, or better: *mchod khang dkar po* (white temple). In the background we see the current 'White Temple', the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang, main temple of the entire monastic ensemble at Tsaparang, the Lötang Monastery.



fig 26



fig 27



fig 28

Fig 26: Life size portrait of Sherab Özer with inscription, picture by Aschoff (Aschoff 1989 : 136)

Figs 27 & 28: Depiction of a royal couple in the 'Tara Temple': likely King Jigten Wangchuk and his queen (Pictures courtesy of L. Fournier)

¹⁷⁴ The inscription identifying this lama was translated by Professor Klimburg-Salter on request of Jörgen Aschoff, Aschoff 189 : 115. The fact that he was Jigten Wangchig's son is stated in the Vaidurya-ser-po 222.8

10. Maps

One of the major points I want to make in this thesis, is that the names the temples had originally, are different from the names they have now, and that some temples have been mixed up. This is best illustrated in maps. I made four maps, based on the 'Tsaparang site plan' of Michael Beck¹⁷⁵.

One map showing the names Tucci assigned to the temples in 1935. (As we have seen, Tucci changed his ideas about the *Lo-thang dgon-pa* fourteen years later, after he learned from the Vaidurya-ser-po that there must be a temple or monastery at Tsaparang called *Blo-thang*. He then decides to rename the Lo-thang dgon-pa Blothang¹⁷⁶, ignoring the 11th century features of the small temple he had noticed visiting the place.

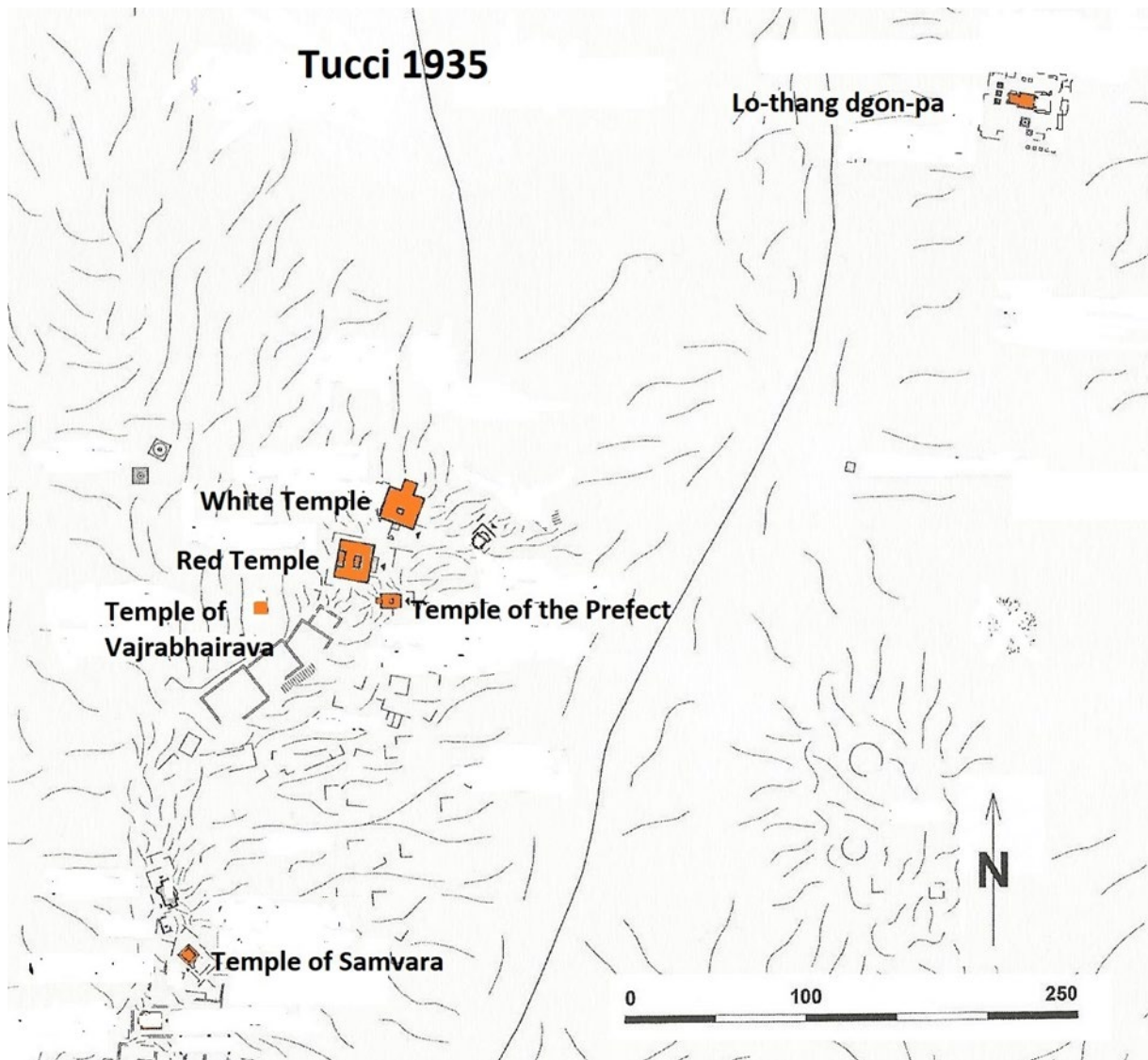
By linking the name Blothang to the temple which stood apart from the rest of the monastic ensemble at Tsaparang, Tucci blocked the possibility of a proper identification of another building as the main temple of the Blothang/Lötang Monastery. That identity "had already been given away" to the small monastic ensemble across the stream, the first temple Tucci visited when he came to Tsaparang. The fact that Tucci passed the White Temple – the current Tara Temple – without noticing it (because the Tibetan officer substituting the *dzongpon* distracted him) helped to cause the erroneous identification of the main temple of the Lötang Monastery as "The White Temple". A mistake which lived on until today.

My maps, based on Beck's plan, show:

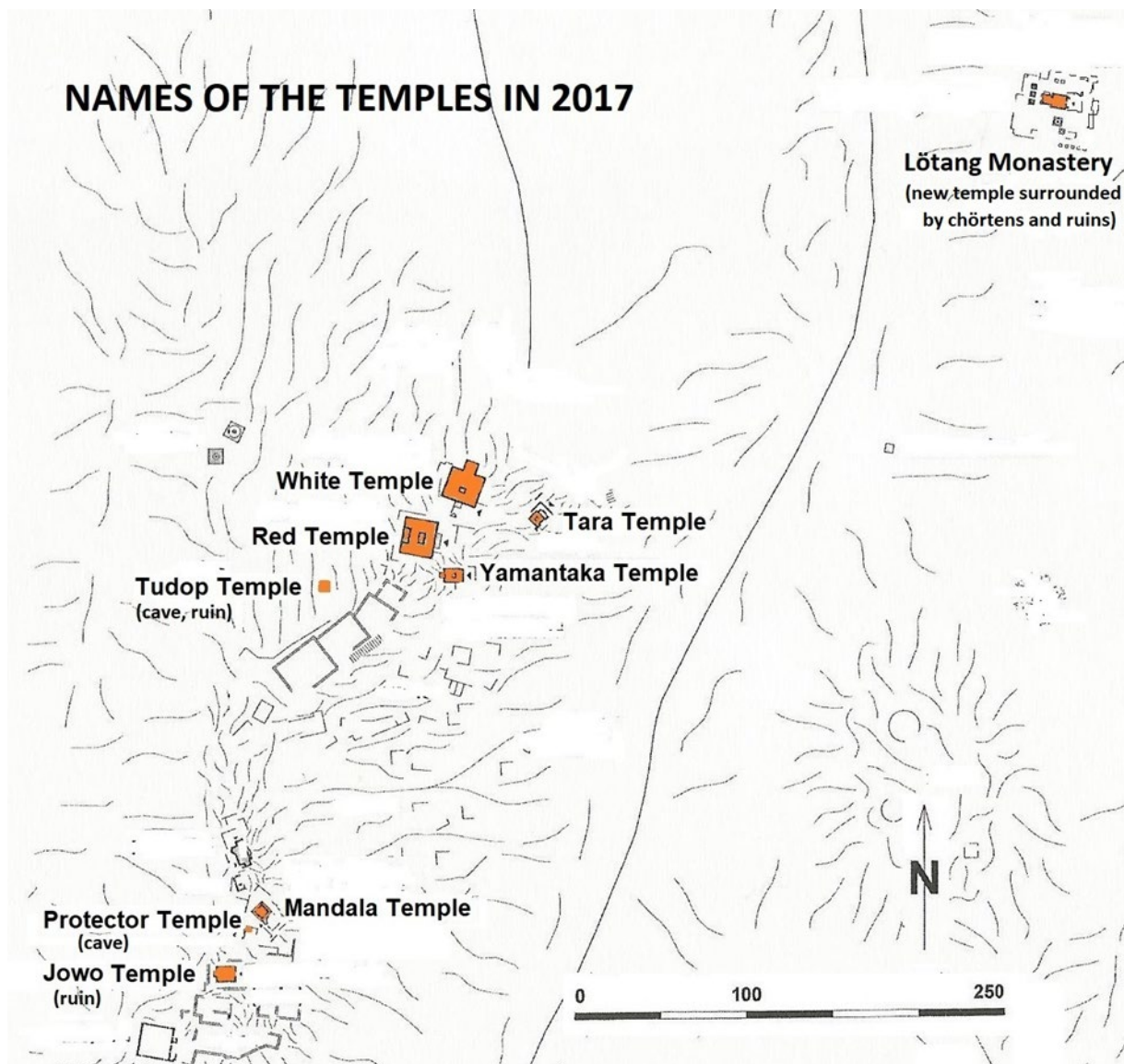
1. the names Tucci assigned,
2. the names the temples are known by today,
3. the temples which appear in the Vaidurya-ser-po and
4. the names the temples should carry, to my opinion.

¹⁷⁵ Beck 2018 : 69

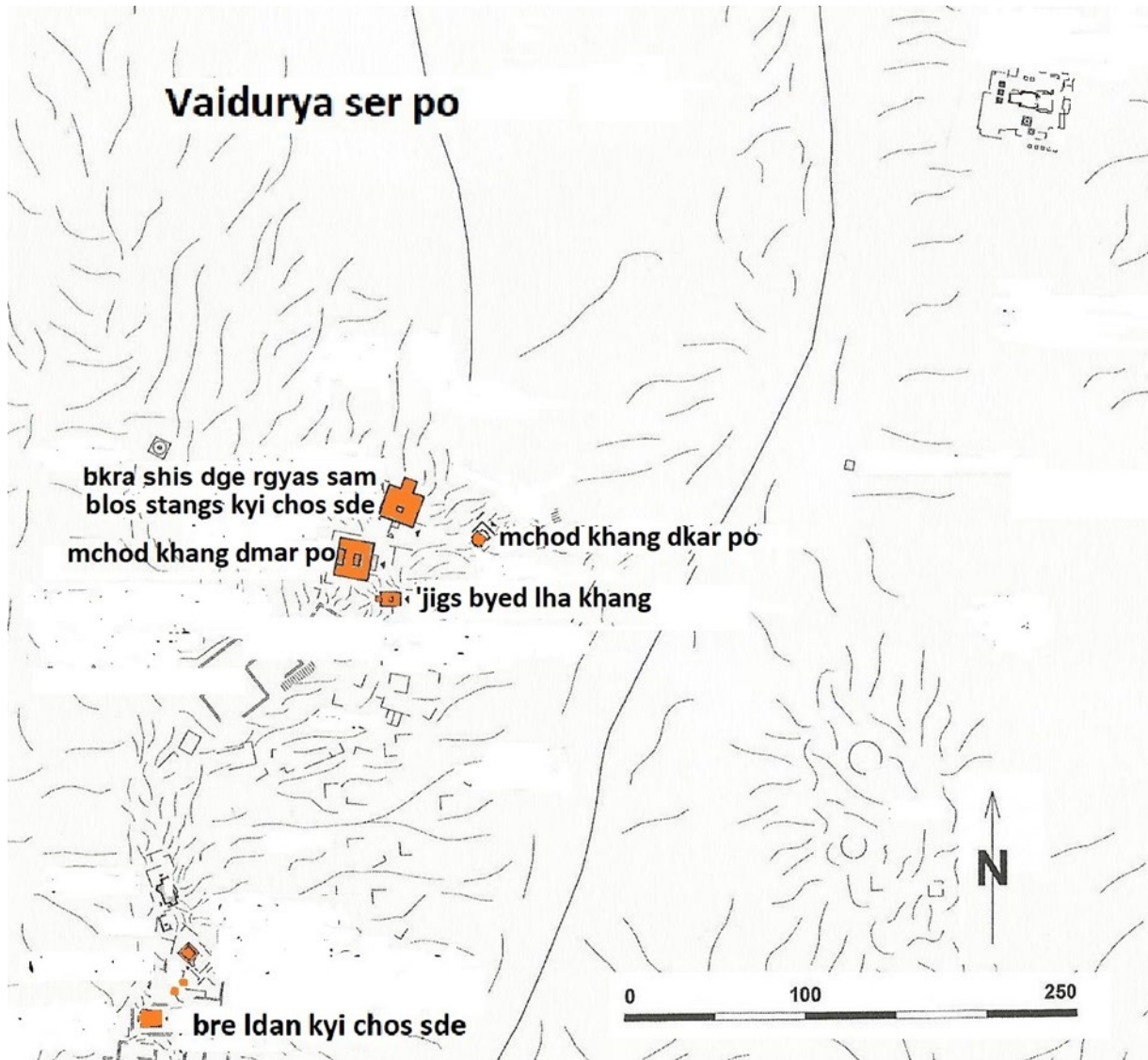
¹⁷⁶ Tucci 1949 : 487, n. 26



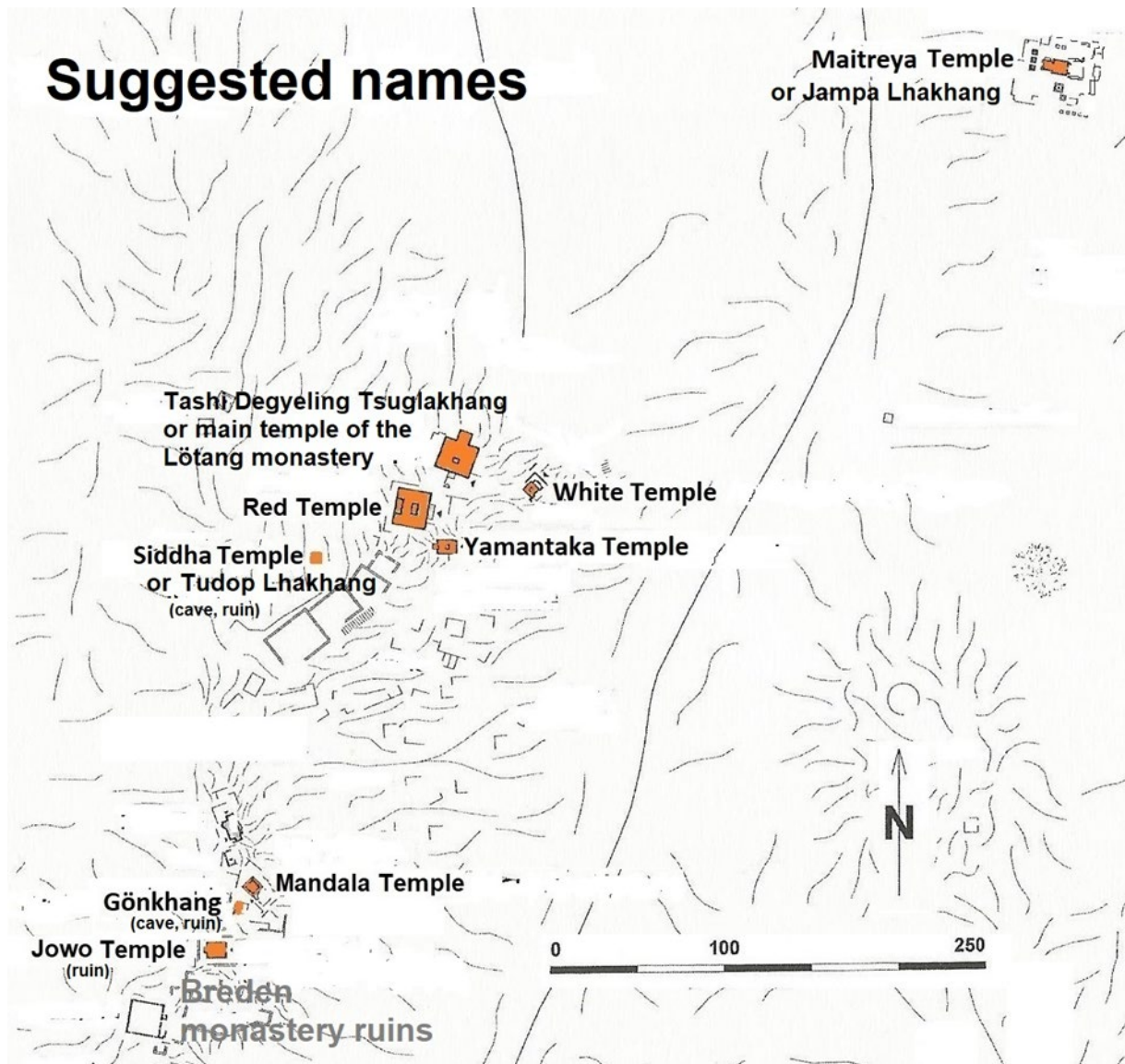
Map 1. This map shows the names Tucci assigned to the temples in 1935. Fourteen years later, Tucci learns from the Vaidurya-ser-po that the monastery at Tsaparang was called *Blo-thang* and then he thinks that he had incorrectly interpreted the name of the *Lo-thang dgon-pa* and that it should be: *Blo-thang* (Tucci 1949 : 487, n. 26), ignoring the fact that this small temple had 11th century features.



Map 2. On this map we see three temples which were not noticed by Tucci, the Tara Temple and two temples on top of the peak of Tsaparang. The latter two are not discussed in the present study, but must have been part of the Breden (Bre-ldan) monastery (see map 3).



Map 3. The names of temples appearing in the Vaidurya-ser-po



Map 4. Suggested names.

11. Conclusions

11.1 When the 'White Temple' at Tsaparang was built and by whom

The 'White Temple' of Tsaparang should be called the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang and was built during the reign of king Phun-tshogs-Ide, between 1424 and 1436 as the first temple of the Lötang monastery, by the Buddhist master Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsonдру, according to the Vaidurya-ser-po, line 221.22. He made many receptacles of body, speech and mind at the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang according to the *chos 'byung mkhas pa'l 'phrog* (the enchanting, intelligent religious history) written in 1606 by Zhang zhung pa dPal 'byor bzang po (Vitali 2012 : 181).

Hase Phagpa Yeshe Tsonдру seems to have worked with Ladakhi craftsmen, who seem to have accompanied the Ladakhi princes Trisam Gyelmo when she came to marry the Phun-tshogs-Ide in 1424. The textile motives on the ceiling planks, the hundreds of tiny Indian looking figures painted on the walls and the color palette in the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang indicate that artists from Ladakh were involved.

The marriage and coronation ceremonies in 1424 seem to have been presided over by the Sakya lama Lotsawa Ngawang Dragpa, who seems to be depicted, riding on a white horse, in the foundational scene in the *cella*. (Not by the Geluk lama Ngawang Dragpa, the author of the mNga' ris rgyal rabs, the Ngari Chronicles, as Vitali assumes.)

Hase 'Phagpa Yeshe Tsonдру seems to have supervised image makers from Gyantse as well. The clay sculptures in the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang share certain similarities with clay sculptures in the Tsuglagkhang of the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde, made in 1421-1423¹⁷⁷.

Queen Trisam Gyelmo might have been involved, as it is known that she had an applique *thangka* made¹⁷⁸, and to my knowledge, this must have been done in Gyantse, the main, if not the only, center where such patchwork *thangkas* were made at that time¹⁷⁹.

In the 1440's the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang was renovated: the entrance was reduced in width, statues of Hayagriva and Vajrapani were added. New wall paintings were made at the back of these gatekeepers. The sculptures of Tsongkhapa and his disciples, at the northeastern wall, seems to have been added in the 1440's too.

11.2 Why this knowledge was obscured until now

Knowledge about the 'White Temple' was obscured, in the first place because identities were mixed up. The current Tara Temple is the white temple, the *mchod khang dkar po* of the Vaidurya-ser-po,

¹⁷⁷ Henss 2015 : 514 -519

¹⁷⁸ Vitali 1996 : 133

¹⁷⁹ Henss 2015 : 505 -511

built by Jigten Wangchuk around 1540. Knowledge about this temple was kept from Tucci, because the *dzongpon* used it as his temporary 'headquarters' in the first half of the 20th century: he lived in the desecrated temple during his occasional visits to Tsaparang and let other people live here during his absence.

12. Recommendations for further study

1.

I would like to track down and study the correspondence between Khedrubje – the abbot of the Gyantse Pelkhor Chöde when the Tsuglagkhang was built – and queen Trisam Gyelmo to be able to shed an even brighter light upon the foundation history of the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang.

2.

A painting and an inscription in the Tholing assembly Hall show king Phun-tshogs-lde shortly after he had taken monastic vows in 1436: he is portrayed as Shakya-'od, the name given to Phun-tshogs-lde when he was ordained. The painting was made before 1440, as his father Khri-rNam-rgyal-lde, who died in 1439 appears in it. The painting makes clear that rNam-rgyal-lde re-ascended the throne when his son took monastic vows.

In the painting Shakya-'od is seated between two young men: Blo-bzang-rab-brtan (Lobsang Rabten) and Namgye Sang rgyas. The latter is his son, here depicted as a monk. Blo-bzang-rab-brtan is the son of Chögyal Buddha, as the Vaidurya -ser-po reveals. Chögyal Buddha is neither Phun-tshogs-lde/Shakya-'od nor Namgye Sang rgyas. He is from an ancient lineage of kings. This Chögyal Buddha could be a chöggial from Gyantse, from Lo (Mustang) or still a few other places....

During the reign of Blo-bzang-rab-brtan the Mandala Temple and the Red Temple of Tsaparang were built. Blo-bzang-rab-brtan was born in 1422 and not in 1458 as Vitali states. The Mandala Temple and the Red Temple of Tsaparang were built around 1440 respectively in the 1440's, not later as several authors focusing on the region claim.

Ngawang Dragpa, with whose return the spread of the Guge teaching in Guge started, returned around 1438, and not before 1424 as Vitali claims.

3. An inscription in the Tholing Assembly Hall, dating back to around 1438, reveals that West-Indian artists ('phags yul nub phyogs kyi bzo rigs) were active in Guge before that period. This seems to point at the artists who executed the murals in the 'White Temple' of Tsaparang, the Tashi Degyeling Tsuglagkhang.

The inscription says in full: *'Phags yul nub phyogs kyi bzo rigs kun la chags bral gyur te 'dug*. Vitalis translates this as: "All the artist of West India became free from attachments", but as my Tibetan teacher G. Forgues explained, this should be "We do not need West-Indian artists anymore".

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Accountability of the figures

All maps and the photo's on the cover and in the figs 3,4,5, 9, 14, 19, 25 by the author. Maps of the situation at Tsaparang are based on a plan of Michael Beck (Beck 2017 : 69)

Photo's in the figs 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 20b, 27, 28: from the archives of L. Fournier, provided to me by Peter Van Ham

Photo's fig 8 and 18: courtesy of Li Gotami-Govinda, 1948

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Photo fig 26: courtesy of Jörgen Aschoff (Aschoff 1989 : 136)