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RESEARCH NOTE

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A REMARKABLE *CHORTEN* IN MARKHA VILLAGE, LADAKH, INDIA

Among the ruins of Markha,¹ the main village of the eponymous valley parallel to the Indus in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir state, one finds a group of *chortens* (*mchod-rten*; stupas) located about twenty meters from the entrance of the abandoned Hemis *labrang*² (*bla-brang*), at the foot of the terrace that bears the ancient palace (fig. 1). Two of these *chortens* are larger than the others. One has a series of four stelae along its side.³ The other, whose main wall collapsed about eighty years ago according to local informants (figs. 2, 3),⁴ has a lion throne bearing the remains of stucco bas-reliefs and traces of ochre paint. Since its construction, some terracing work has been carried out, and the *chorten* now acts as a *de facto* retaining wall: the level of the ground on its northern side is about two meters higher than the original level, which can be seen on its other side (fig. 3). A door once opening onto the ancient footpath is now half buried as a result of the terracing; the remaining upper half has been closed off with stones. The *chorten*'s missing wall has become its main entrance (fig. 4).



Fig. 1 View of the palace of Markha village from the east. The *chorten* is located behind the trees in the direction of the arrow. Photo: Martin Vernier, 2006.

Inside the *chorten* one can discover murals with a rich iconographic program and two series of inscriptions (figs. 5–8). The murals have been severely damaged by the collapse of the wall and half of the painted images are now missing. The main wall, i.e. the one facing the original entrance, is usually the key commanding the iconographic program, without which the reading of the other walls becomes rather complicated. Furthermore, the faces have lost most of the attributes that allow for the identification of individual figures. Our list of names is tentative (fig. 5). Of the twelve inscriptions remaining on the murals, only seven are legible (fig. 8).

The most beautiful artwork to be seen in this *chorten*, and our main focus in this research note, is undoubtedly an exceptional column with an intricately carved capital (figs.



Fig. 2 View of the *chorten* from the north. Photo: Martin Vernier, 2004.

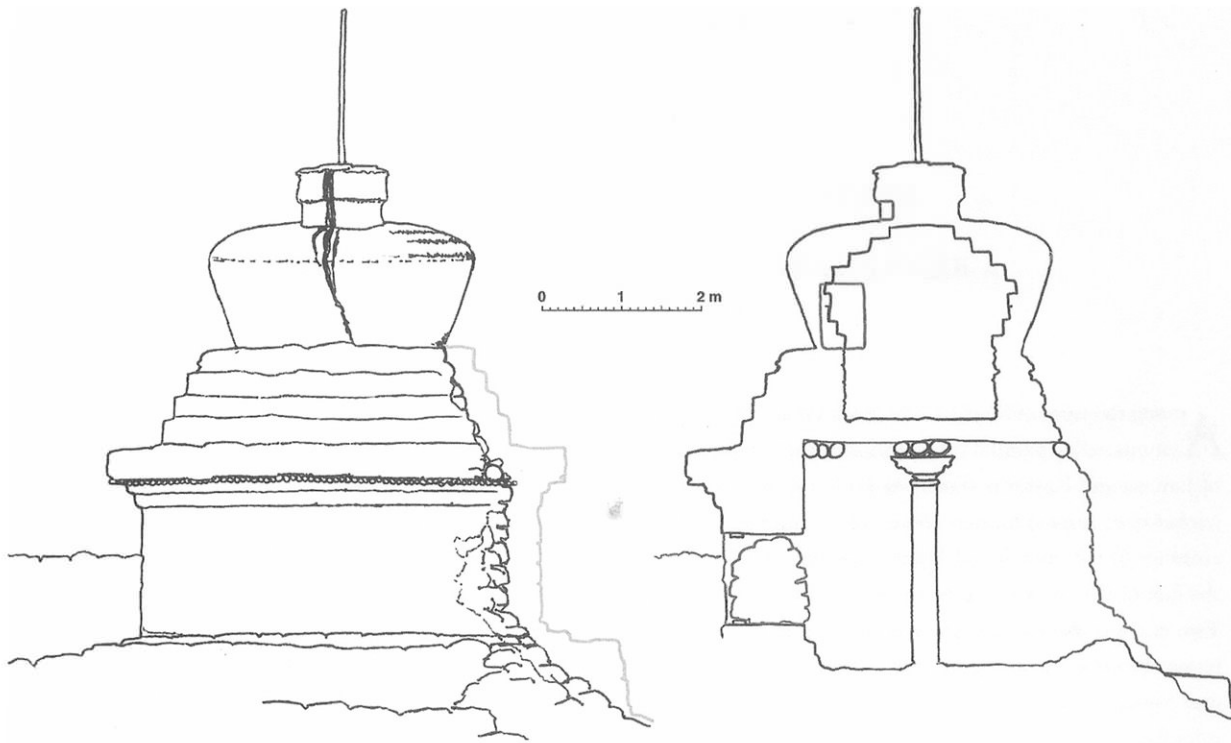
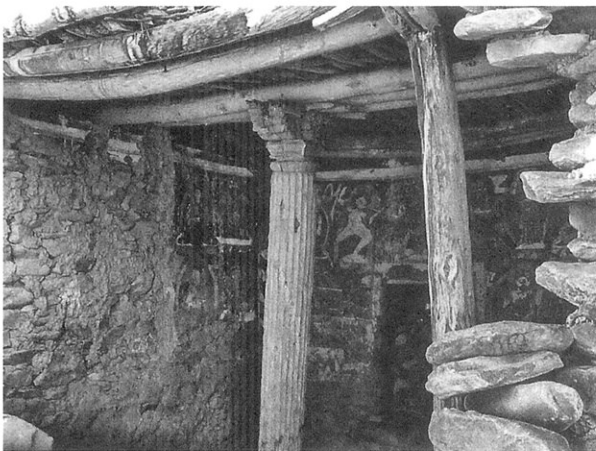


Fig. 3 Elevation and section of the *chorten* (view from the west).
Drawing: Martin Vernier, 2009.

4, 9). The shaft, 24 centimeters in diameter, is nicely fluted and its top is decorated with upward lotus petals. The capital begins with a square base that is carved on all four sides with floral patterns around a central flower. The main portion of the capital is carved on its two principal faces (fig. 10). In the center of its western face, a seated Buddha occupies an architectural niche, either side of which is carved with floral scrolls. Although damaged, the Buddha is still recognizable through its general appearance (*usnisba*), *vajrasana*



posture, and hands in *dhyana mudra*. On the capital's eastern face, in a similar niche, Avalokiteshvara is seated in *sukhasana* posture with a lotus flower above his shoulder. The ends of the capital on this face are carved with two elephant-headed *makaras*. A closer look at the left *makara* shows that beyond the two scrolls shaping the edge of the capital one can see a wooden protrusion, which appears to be the stylized body of a lion (fig. 11). Though severely damaged, the eyes as well as the front legs are still visible. Above this head is a rectangular recess where another piece of wood once fit. On the other extremity of the capital no such lion or recess can be seen. This asymmetry directly points to an original use for this capital as part of a portico, similar to the one still seen at Alchi Sumtseg (fig. 12), Lhachuse, or Wanla Chuchigzhal *lhakhang*. Because the *makaras* are sculpted on only one face of the capital, the column was likely positioned on the right-hand side of the portico, allowing the *makaras* and lion to be visible upon approach.

The two deities in the central architectural niches are finely carved in high relief. As with the characters depicted

Fig. 4 Interior of the *chorten* viewed from the collapsed wall.
Photo: Martin Vernier, 2009.

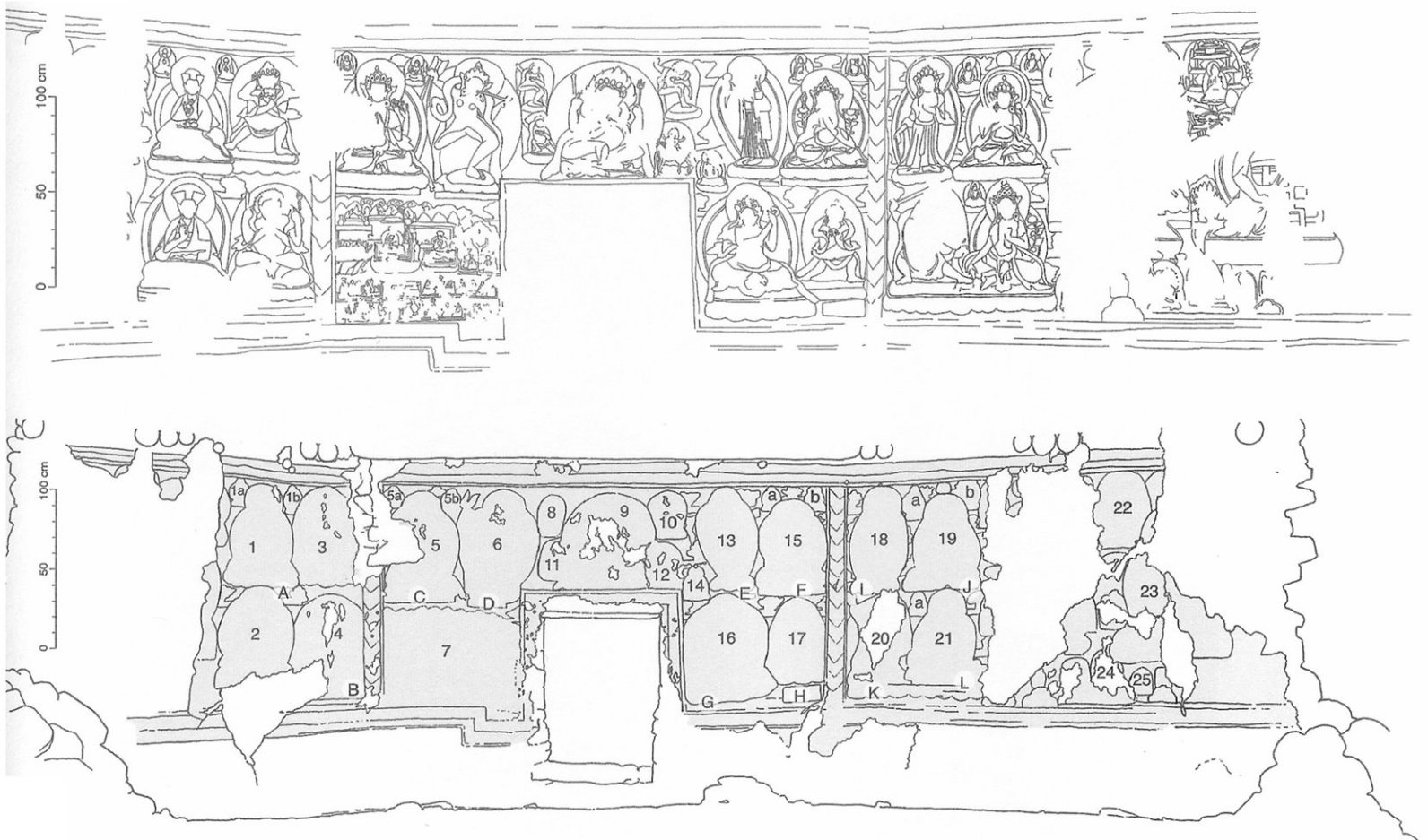


Fig. 5 Schematic drawing of the Markha village *chorten* murals indicating figures (numerals) and inscriptions (letters). Image: Martin Vernier, 2009.

Tentative identification of figures:

Right wall:

1. Padmasambhava
2. A monk
3. Cakrasamvara in union with Vajravahni
4. Four-armed Mahakala

Entrance wall:

5. Shadakshara Lokeshvara
6. Machig Labdron
7. Monks and laymen, probably the patrons, engaged in consecration ritual or celebration.
8. Red Vajrayogini
9. Four-armed Mahakala
10. Simhamukha
11. Form of Mahakala?
12. Sri Devi (Palden Lhamo)
13. Achi Chokyi Dolma
14. Amitabha?
15. Manjushri
16. Vajravinasaraswati
17. Two-armed Cakrasamvara with Vajravahni

Left wall:

18. Avalokiteshvara
19. Shadakshara Lokeshvara
20. Niladabda or black Hayagriva
21. White Tara
22. Buddha Sakyamuni
23. Amitabha
24. ?
25. ?



Fig. 6 Markha village *chorten*, (a) right wall, figures 1 to 4; (b) left wall, White Tara.
Photographs: Quentin Devers, 2009.



Fig. 6b

on the murals, their faces have been intentionally damaged. Their closest example can be found in Lhachuse,⁵ which displays very similar central niches. One of the capitals in this temple has a composition close to that on the western side of our capital (fig. 13): the top of the shaft ends with upward lotus petals, the square base of the capital is carved with floral patterns, and the main part features a Buddha in a central architectural niche with floral scrolls on the left and right. However, the Lhachuse capital has an additional layer between the square base and the main part, which makes the capital look much taller. According to Heinrich Poell, the scrolls on the western side are stylistically closer to those found in Alchi Sumtseg.⁶ As for the roof design of the niches, the Lhachuse roof is a stepped trefoil arch while the Markha roof is a rounded arch. Poell rightly points out that no other examples of *makaras* are known in Ladakh. The closest *makara* heads are found in Spiti on a capital in Shelkar Lhabrang.⁷ Based on these similarities, the column and its capital are most likely earlier than the Alchi group of monuments period, i.e. from the eleventh or twelfth century depending on the dating used for the Alchi Sumtseg.⁸ In any case, they are clearly reused from an earlier construction.

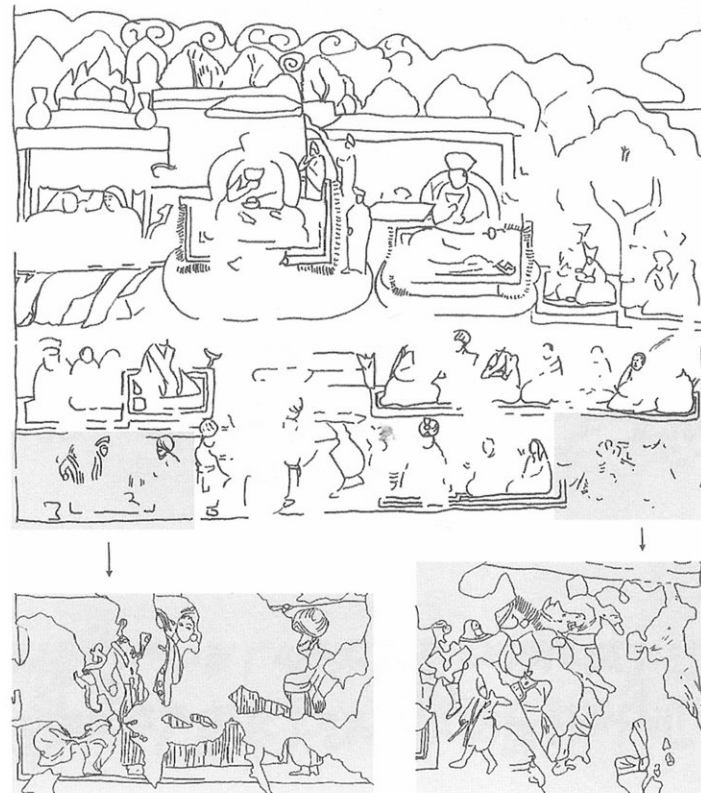


Fig. 7 Outline drawing of figure 7, entrance wall, Markha village *chorten*.
Image: Martin Vernier, 2009.

This ancient wooden architectural element has to be linked with a piece found in *Teacha gonpa*, the next monastery when walking up the valley (fig. 14). The latter fragment of an ancient console or beam end is now used to support a pillar in the courtyard of the old *dukhang* (assembly hall). Now placed upside down, it is carved with a stylized lion with its tail curled above its back.⁹ This lion is typical of early Ladakhi temples, for example Lhachuse, Alchi, or Wanla, where fluted columns like the one in Markha can be observed. It is therefore quite possible that both the column and this lion have the same origin: an ancient temple with a wooden portico that was destroyed or dismantled at some point in the past.

In light of this elaborate structure origin, we are led to seek this provenance mainly in one place out of the three we previously considered: Skyu.¹⁰ In the monastery of this village stands an old temple whose murals have been recently studied by Melissa Kerin.¹¹ She believes they were made shortly before the Alchi group of monuments period.¹² Despite the inherent uncertainties for dating both the murals in Skyu and the column in Markha, we are dealing with the

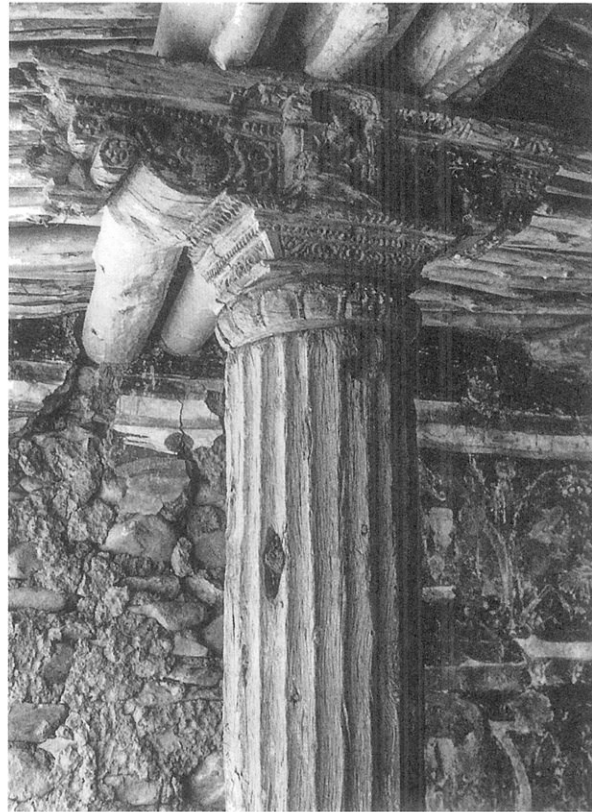


Fig. 9 Eastern side of the column. Juniper wood, 24 cm in diameter.
Photo: Quentin Devers, 2009.

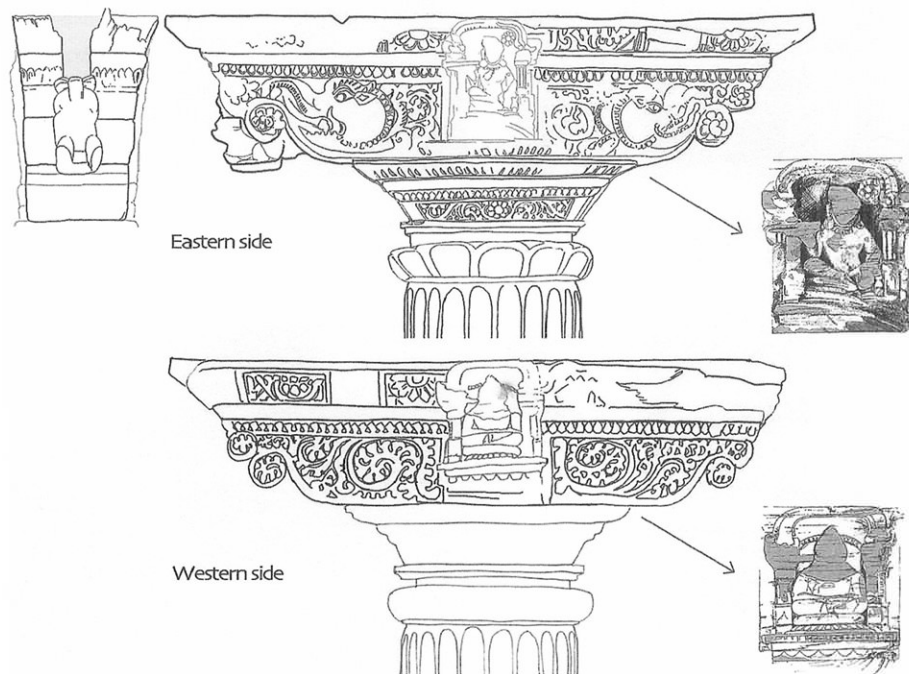


Fig. 10 Eastern and western sides of the capital with southern profile on the upper left.
Drawing: Martin Vernier, 2009.

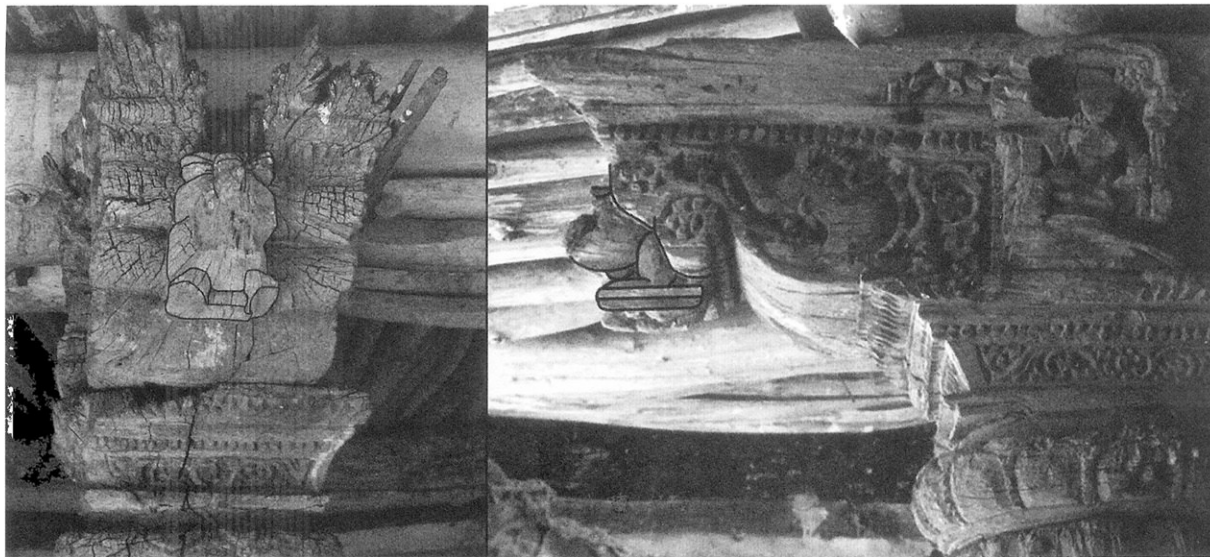


Fig. 11 Detail of the recess with an outline of the lion.
Photo: Quentin Devers and Martin Vernier, 2009.



Fig. 12 Right capital of the Alchi Sumtseg portico, Alchi monastery, Ladakh. Photo courtesy of Heinrich Poell, 2004.

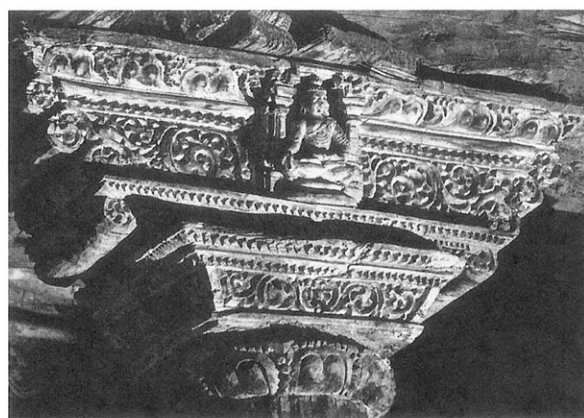


Fig. 13 Capital in Lhachuse.
Photo courtesy of Heinrich Poell, 2004.

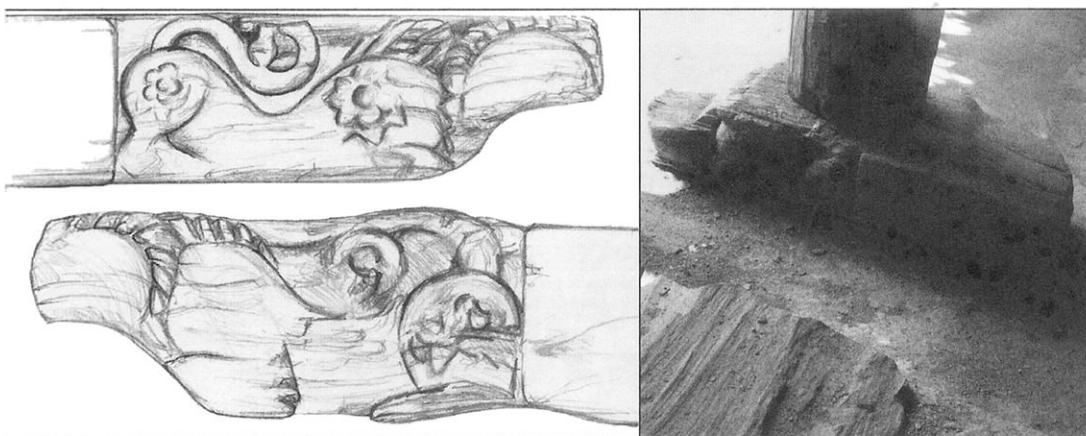


Fig. 14 Sculpted console or beam end in Teacha *gonpa*. Juniper wood (?), 70×27×17 cm.
Drawing and photo: Martin Vernier, 2009.

same period of time. Based on the floor plan and the size of the statue of the old temple in Skyu, we hypothesized that the temple is probably a remnant from one of the two side chapels that once enclosed a larger temple.¹³ Considering that the column in Markha must be part of an ancient portico from the same period as the murals in Skyu, the hypothesis of an ancient larger temple there is reinvigorated. A closer examination of the architectural marks on this chapel is called for in order to corroborate or refute the hypothesis.¹⁴

The column in the *chorten* of Markha village is a rare piece of artwork. Its history probably begins in the eleventh or twelfth century with a temple of significant size that featured an elaborate wooden structure such as a portico. This structure was then dismantled years, decades, or centuries later. One of its columns was reused in Markha village, while one of its consoles or beam ends resurfaced in Teacha monastery further up the valley.

We hope this note will awaken interest in these pieces of woodwork, raise concern for their preservation, and invigorate further research on the possible origin of the structure they once were part of.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 For an overview of the archaeological sites of Markha village and the Markha Valley, see Quentin Devers and Martin Vernier, "An Archaeological Account of the Markha Valley, Ladakh," *Revue d'Étude Tibétaine* 20 (2011): 61–113.
- 2 A *labrang* is a rest house for monks while they are away from their monastery. Each *labrang* is owned and managed by a specific monastery. At Markha village, the Hemis *labrang* was used by the monks and other religious dignitaries from Hemis monastery while they were in the valley. It was later converted into a school run by monks before its final abandonment. It consists of an imposing three-storey building and an open courtyard surrounded by a gallery.
- 3 For a description and illustrations of the four stelae, see Devers and Vernier, "An Archaeological Account of the Markha Valley," 76–77.
- 4 This *chorten* was first surveyed by Martin Vernier in 2004, and studied again in subsequent years; Quentin Devers completed its recording in 2009. See *ibid.*
- 5 Our thanks to Christian Luczanits for pointing out this reference and providing pictures of this capital.

- 6 Personal communication. We thank Heinrich Poell for his help and comments on this capital.
- 7 Christian Luczanits, personal communication. For photographs of the Shelkar *lhabrang* capital, see <http://www.univie.ac.at/itba/pages/pictures/ShalkharCapital/index.html> (accessed 10 December 2010). According to Heinrich Poell, "The only remote parallel is again on the Sum-tsek façade, where there are aquatic creatures (with upturned snouts) on the capitals left and right of the entrance. However, in Alchi these are clearly very stylised animals, whose artists were probably unsure of the significance of the design and its details. The Markha capital, by contrast, has a clearly articulated elephant head. You should also check again the similarities with the Salchar capital pointed out by Christian [Luczanits] – this could be rather significant for the art history of Ladakh." Personal communication, 4 January 2011.
- 8 The carvings of Lhachuse are discussed by Poell in a forthcoming article. He shows that although they are close to those found at Alchi, they display earlier features and are much closer to Kashmiri Buddhist sculpture. Though it is hard to say how much earlier, they are clearly from before the Alchi group of monuments period. Both the Alchi Sumtseg and Sumda Chung are part of the same group of monuments; Christian Luczanits, "The Early Buddhist Heritage of Ladakh Reconsidered," in *Ladakhi Histories: Local and Regional Perspectives*, ed. John Bray (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 86. Their dating is still a matter of contention; Philip Denwood suggests the late eleventh century (Denwood, "The Dating of the Sumtsek Temple at Alchi," paper presented at the first conference of the Société Européenne pour l'Étude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale, Paris, 27–28 April 2007), while Christian Luczanits posits the early thirteenth century (Luczanits, "Alchi Sumtseg Reconsidered," in *Recent Research on Ladakh 2007*, ed. John Bray and Nawang Tsering [Leh: J&K Academy for Art, Culture, and Languages, 2007], 73). If we consider this column to precede the Alchi group of monuments period, it is from the early eleventh century in the case of a late eleventh-century dating for the Alchi Sumtseg, or from somewhere in the twelfth century in the case of an early thirteenth-century dating.
- 9 This piece is described in detail in Devers and Vernier, "An Archaeological Account of the Markha Valley," 78–79. Briefly, the piece was reshaped at some point in a previous reuse to give it a double curve on both ends and thus the overall shape of a capital. This action unfortunately damaged the lion's face.
- 10 In a previous paper dedicated to the description of the archaeological remains of the valley, we considered two other ruins as possible origins for these wood carvings: the ruined temple known as *lotsawa Lhakhang* in Kaya and the probable former temple in Chalak. See Devers and Vernier, "An Archaeological Account of the Markha Valley."
- 11 Melissa R. Kerin, "Faded Remains: Little-Known Twelfth-Century Wall Paintings in Ladakh's Markha Valley," *Orientalism* 38, 4 (2007): 54–59.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 13 Devers and Vernier, "An Archaeological Account of the Markha Valley," 65–66.
- 14 Another possible origin for such an elaborate portico is Sumda Chen. The floral pattern visible on its doorframe before it was dismantled for restoration is close to those on the capital in Markha *chorten*. The temple appears to have belonged to the same period: one of its wooden statues was dated by carbon-14 testing to the period 1035–1345; see Luczanits, "The Early Buddhist Heritage of Ladakh Reconsidered," 84. The reuse of some of its sculpted wooden parts in other structures needs to be investigated; one of its probable carved beams or lintels can be seen in one of the *chortens* of the village. Sumda Chen is also likely on an itinerary to access the Markha Valley, as indicated by the ruins of a bridge associated with a rock art site and a defense tower, located halfway between Sumda Do and the mouth of the Markha Valley. This site, called Yaru or Waru, was documented with Laurianne Bruneau in 2007 and 2011.