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Quentin Devers, Gerald Kozicz and Heinrich Pöll

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Geographical context

- ¹ Ladakh¹ is the northernmost territory of India. It recently became a Union Territory directly administered by Delhi, after well over a century of being a part of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a high altitude desert, at the meeting point of half a dozen mountain ranges, including two of the most important chains in the world, the Himalayas and the Karakoram. Its villages are spread over altitudes that vary between 2 570 m (8 431 ft) and a little over 4 550 m (14 928 ft), with mountains that rise above 7 500 m (24 606 ft). It is also one of the driest places in the world: because it is located on the northern side of the Himalayas, it is affected by the Himalayan Rain Shadow effect and receives on average only about 160 mm of precipitation per year, snow included.
- ² Although often presented as a “Little Tibet”, Ladakh has the specificity of being located at the intersection of the Tibetan, Central Asian, and Indian spheres of influence. Rock inscriptions written in Tibetan, Sogdian, Tokharian, Arabic, Śāradā, Kharoṣṭī, Brāhmī, and Chinese, dated to the last two thousand years, reflect the fact that the region has been a major crossroads throughout time.

Figure 1. Ladakh within the network of the so-called Silk Routes

© Quentin Devers, 2018

Figure 2. Ladakh and neighbouring regions

© Quentin Devers, 2020

Figure 3. Main places and subregions of Ladakh

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Historical context

- 3 Most of the research on the history of Ladakh has been focused on the study of the *Royal Chronicles*, a forty-two page long work written as recently as the 17th century. On the art historical front, research has largely focused on the so-called Alchi group of monuments (11th to 13th centuries, depending on the school of dating). As for archaeological research, studies were few and mostly ignored until the turn of the 2000s. Because of the patrons who commissioned them, the *Royal Chronicles* and the Alchi group of monuments have received a disproportionate emphasis in an all-Tibetan narrative of the history of Ladakh, which was reinforced by the bias created by the field most of the scholars studying Ladakh came from – Tibetology. There was essentially no history before the rise of the West Tibetan Kingdom of Ngari Skorsum in the 10th century, and no religious history prior to the so-called Second Diffusion of Buddhism in the 10th century either.
- 4 In the past decade or so, tremendous new research has however emerged, helped by the rising of a stonger field of Ladakh Studies, independent from Tibetan Studies. If we take the example of what was the most marginal of the three main disciplines looking at the history of Ladakh, archaeology, we have gone from half a dozen known funerary sites to over a hundred. Twenty of the top thirty petroglyph sites have been discovered in the last five years. Altogether, nearly a thousand archaeological remains have been documented in the past ten years. These numbers are important as they change everything.

- 5 With over 400 rock art sites, 370 fortifications, 260 rock-cut Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, etc. documented to date (and these numbers keep growing every year), Ladakh is proving to be the region of the Himalayas and of the Tibetan Plateau with the largest densities in all categories of remains. It cannot be seen as a Little Tibet anymore: remains show that it was, on the contrary, one of the most important centres of this entire belt.
- 6 Documentation of possible monastic ruins may be in the process of revising the presence of Buddhism in the region by as much as a thousand years: Buddhism apparently flourished in Ladakh long before it ever reached Tibet. Identification of ceramic sherds are proving a diversity of contacts and influences during Protohistory that were only dubious just a few years ago.
- 7 The discovery, and in some instances translation, of hundreds of ancient rock and temple inscriptions in the last five years – for instance in Kharul, Mulbek, Kanji and Mangyu among other locations – have opened up brand new chapters in the history of the region. As an example, only a decade ago a major military event such as the conquest of Gilgit by the armies of Ngari Skorsum in the 11th century could hardly have been considered: it is now an established fact.
- 8 These remains should be understood in the light of the incredible wealth Ladakh once produced: gold, pashmina, shahtoosh, musk, iron, copper, sapphires (once recognised as the best gem-quality sapphires in the world), salt, etc. These valuable commodities attracted merchants, armies, and hordes of bandits from all surrounding regions, and fueled the creation of countless kingdoms, small and big, which in turn left us with the vast array of sites that are the subject of this volume.
- 9 The purpose of these examples is to convey a sense of the prodigious changes the fields looking at the history of Ladakh have undergone in recent times. Discoveries keep being made every year, and each one helps us to understand more chapters and more aspects of the region's extraordinarily rich past.

About the present volume

- 10 This special volume of EMSCAT presents papers on the art history and archaeology of Ladakh from the 18th Conference of the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) that took place in Bedlewo (Poland) in May 2017. The two previous conferences resulted in two volumes proceedings, one released in 2016 for the 16th IALS conference held in Heidelberg² (Germany, 2013), and one forthcoming for the 17th IALS conference held in Kargil³ (India, 2015). It thus felt natural to continue this undertaking. As usual, several papers that were planned were withdrawn, and others, which were originally not presented at the conference, were proposed and accepted as they brought complementary perspectives to the topics under consideration.
- 11 As previously explained, in the past decade a large amount of data on the history of Ladakh has emerged, especially in the fields of archaeology, art history, and epigraphy. It has opened new and unforeseen perspectives on the history of the region. These discoveries pose a double challenge: publishing the research in a timely manner, and doing so with sufficient illustrations. EMSCAT proved very understanding in these matters, and made it possible to create this volume in comfortable conditions and relatively little time. We are very thankful for their patience during the editing process.

- 12 The volume starts with the first comprehensive study of the ancient ceramics of Ladakh, from Prehistory to the modern era. Analysing finds of Kushan, post-Kushan and Western Himalayan pottery types, Samara Broglia de Moura offers a chronotypology that provides us with much needed insights into the geographical spread of different material cultures in Ladakh over time. This is followed by a paper by Quentin Devers about an ensemble of newly documented remains that provide evidence of the presence of Buddhism in Purig and Zanskar before the so-called First Diffusion, possibly going back to the 3rd century BCE. Gerald Kozicz then presents research on the architecture of a pre-11th century temple in Triloknath (Lahaul), which demonstrates the close interaction of Buddhist and Hindu culture in this region. It exemplifies the syncretism that emerged there from highly mixed influences.
- 13 We then move to the Western Tibetan Kingdom of Ngari Skorsum and the so-called Second Diffusion of Buddhism in the 10th-13th centuries. Christiane Kalantari and Eva Allinger analyse the murals of the Dungkar cave temple in Guge and explore the relationship between the visual programs depicted in this monument and the texts they are based on. These issues are central to an understanding of the practices of Buddhism at that time, when the main sects of Tibetan Buddhism were emerging. Next comes a presentation by Nils Martin about wall paintings in Ladakh from the 14th-15th centuries. They show a combination of iconographic elements that illustrate the particular foothold that the now well-developed sects had taken in Ladakh. The study further includes a helpful synthesis of the larger geopolitical situation on the Tibetan Plateau and in Central Asia that led to this particular religious geography.
- 14 In the next paper Quentin Devers and Neil Howard present an update of the study of the fortified complex of Basgo – one of the main strongholds of the Namgyal Dynasty – which was besieged during three years by the Tibeto-Mongol armies of the Fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century. Gerald Kozicz then introduces the 18th century Onpo Lhakhang in Sumur (Nubra), whose architecture and iconography are based on the Nyingma tradition, a sect that has long been overlooked in Ladakh. Finally, Rob Linrothe focuses on the adaptation of iconography and religious portraits to the new mediums of photography and printing in the late 19th to early 20th century, showing how age-old traditions can be transferred to new formats.
- 15 We hope that this collection of papers will contribute to an understanding of the rich history of this region at the crossroads of the Tibetan, Central Asian and sub-continental spheres of cultures.

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NOTES

1. For most places in Ladakh, Wylie spellings are either unknown or, at best, debated by villagers. Furthermore, it needs to be recalled that multiple ethnic groups coexisted and succeeded one another in the region. Not all toponyms are therefore of Tibetan origin. As a result, providing artificial Wylie spelling can only create confusion about the toponymy and etymology of said place names. These spellings are therefore left to the authors' discretion to encourage coherence across their own publications as there are no "right" or "wrong" spellings to enforce, but only arbitrary preferences. Furthermore, some terms that could not be translated in a satisfactory manner by the authors were left as is, instead of being replaced by their English counterparts as otherwise required by EMSCAT.

2. Linrothe & Pöll 2016.

3. Luczanits & Poell, in press.