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Nouvelles notes sur les défenses de Basgo

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Introduction

- ¹ The fortified complex of Basgo is one of the largest in Ladakh. Known as Rabtan Lhatse Khar, it was one of the first fortifications mentioned by the early explorers of Ladakh¹, and was one of the first depicted in the early travel accounts (Torrens 1862, p. 176). Howard provided a sketch plan of the defences and the first analytic description of the site in his survey of fortresses in central Ladakh (Howard 1989, pp. 227-237). In a subsequent visit to the site, he noticed errors in the positioning of several of the structures in his previously published sketch map. Furthermore, Devers later surveyed the complex on several occasions from 2009 onward, and documented additional defensive structures in and around the site. The goal of this paper is to present these corrections and an updated sketch plan of the site². In view of the speed with which human activity and nature have been obliterating these structures, we felt that this (necessarily approximate) topographic record will be of interest and use to future researchers of the architectural heritage of Ladakh.

General overview of the site

Figure 1. Overall view of the fortified complex of Basgo from the west

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- 2 The fortified complex consists of outer and inner defences (figs 1-4). The inner defences comprise four main parts (A-D in fig. 3), while the outer defences consist of two parts (E, F in fig. 3).

Figure 2. Aerial view of the fortified complex of Basgo, with highlight of the inner defences (dashed line) and outer defences (OT1 to OT4)

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Figure 3. Overall plan of the fortified complex of Basgo

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Figure 4. Central parts of the fortified complex of Basgo

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- 3 The main fort (A) is built on a sedimentary formation with cliffs or steep slopes on three sides, and is linked to the main mountain behind it (fig. 5). The surrounding complex topography is dotted with numerous defensive structures

Figure 5. Main fort (A) and ruins of the fortified settlement viewed from the tower T3

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- 4 This environment includes: the slope below the main fort, where the ruins of the former fortified settlement are scattered (B in fig. 3; see also fig. 5); a cirque-like formation (C in fig. 3), defended by a low rampart that links tower T2 to T3, and by a defensive structure (T6) built atop a small crag that stands at the centre of the cirque; a formation that has the shape of an arena, where the ruins of several periods can be seen (D in fig. 3, see also fig. 6); a plateau overlooking the inner defences and defended by the outpost tower OT1 (E in fig. 3, see also fig. 7), and a crest crowned with a rampart linking the outpost towers OT3 and OT4 (F in fig. 3, see also fig. 8).

Figure 6. The arena-shaped formation (D) viewed from the north

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Figure 7. Outpost tower OT1 seen from the north

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Figure 8. Outpost towers OT3 and OT4 with the remains of the wall linking them viewed from plateau E in the southeast

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- 5 The inner defences are built on a red and white sediment, which gives the site its unique character. This sediment is very friable and erodes quickly, resulting in a strange, sometimes surreal landscape (fig. 9), especially in the cirque area (B, C in fig. 3). Duncan noticed the singularity of the scenery when she wrote: “The narrow path winds steeply up among rocks worn into the most fantastic forms imaginable, looking in one part like an enchanted castle with its guardian goblins and demons turned into stone” (Duncan 1906, p. 133). The rapid weathering of the sediment has caused severe erosion of the cliffs, and several structures have already collapsed as the ground they were built on subsided. In order to prevent the inexorable collapse of the Maitreya temple (Te1 on fig. 5), the village committee built large encasing stone walls around the formation the temple stands on with the support of the World Monuments Fund (fig. 10).

Figure 9. Examples of natural shapes found in the cirque

© Quentin Devers, 2009 (left) and 2015 (right)

Figure 10. Evolution of the Maitreya temple Te1 between 1985 and 2014

© Neil Howard, 1985 (left); Quentin Devers, 2014 (right)

- 6 At first glance, the main fort does not appear more difficult to capture than the numerous other fortifications that follow the same model of a fort naturally defended by cliffs or steep slopes on three sides with a weak spot at the back, where the topography connects to the main mountain. The strength of this complex lies in the complexity of the surrounding topography, and in the way this environment was fortified with defensive structures set far in advance of the main fortifications – enabling Ladakhi forces to successfully resist the three-year siege by the Tibeto-Mongol armies of the Fifth Dalai Lama from 1681 to 1683 (Petech 1977, p.73). It is these defences that we will now review.

Outer defences

- 7 The northeastern side of the complex is dominated by higher topography, which presents several angles for an attack. In order to impede the advance of an enemy, a series of outpost towers were built ahead of the ramparts. Soldiers posted inside these towers were cut off from the fortress, and would have no option for a safe retreat. The largest of these towers (OT1) is on a plateau (E on fig. 3). It is actually built at the corner

edge of the plateau, which means that it is naturally defended on two sides by cliffs (fig. 7). The other two sides, however, face flat open ground, and a deep ditch (3 m wide and 1,5 m deep) was dug for some extra protection. OT1 is quadrangular, and has walls of mud brick built over a base of water-worn cobbles.

- 8 OT2 is set in the slope between the rampart and the plateau E. It is very decayed and its shape is now difficult to distinguish (fig. 11), but Howard could see it was D-shaped when he surveyed it about thirty years ago (Howard 1989, pp. 227-230). Two stages of construction could then be identified: the southeastern part represented the remains of an original round or D-shaped tower (built in stone masonry for the lower part and mud bricks for the upper elevation); whereas the northern wall (the one still standing) was a newer addition in rammed earth with mud bricks on its upper parts. While OT1's purpose was to prevent an attacker from occupying the edge of the plateau (which provides an ideal position for firing at the ramparts), OT2's function was to prevent enemies from launching an attack from the mountain slope to the northwest.

Figure 11. Outpost tower OT2 from the southeast

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- 9 Towers OT3 and OT4 are set on the ridge that leads from plateau E to the summit of the mountain (figs 8, 12, 13). They are linked by a low wall, the purpose of which was presumably to prevent encircling movements by an attacker and to provide cover for defenders manoeuvring between the two towers. Both towers are circular and built in stone. OT4 is built at the upper edge of the crest and, similar to OT1, it faces clear open ground to the northeast. As a consequence, a ditch was dug to reinforce the tower (fig. 14). In addition to preventing attacks from the mountaintop, OT4 also served as an observation post to watch movements coming from the west, from the north and from the east.

Figure 12. Outpost tower OT3 from the north

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Figure.13. Outpost tower OT4 from the east

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Figure 14. Ditch of outpost tower OT

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- 10 Indeed, to the west of Basgo is the plateau leading to Likir and Saspol, known as Likir Thang, which is higher than the fort (figs 2, 5: the plateau can be seen in the background of fig. 5 on the other side of the valley). It is therefore only from OT4 that one can have a direct view of the Likir Thang. OT4 also has an open view into the valley of Basgo toward the north and in the direction of Nimu toward the east. Here again, there is no view toward these two directions from the fort. OT4 was thus of prime importance to see the movement of enemies coming from the west, north and east.

Inner defences

Figure 15. Inner defences viewed from outpost tower OT4 in the north

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- 11 The inner defences consist of the parts of the fortified complex that are protected by the ramparts (fig. 15). As in most Ladakhi fortresses, there is an inner and an outer rampart: the outer rampart extends from T1 to D (fig. 3) and protects all parts of the complex, while the inner rampart protects only the inner fort, extending from T1 to P6 (fig. 4). The outer rampart is defended by a series of towers (T1 to T3), all quadrangular and built in rammed earth (fig. 16). T1 also forms the back part of the Maitreya temple (Te1) – the tower and the temple are contiguous and located within the same rammed earth building, separated only by internal partition walls. The “arena” D was further defended by the two towers T4 and T5; they are now so dilapidated that their original shape is impossible to ascertain. Extremely dilapidated traces of other building structures there point to an older fortification, which could have been an independent fort that was constructed before the present complex.

Figure 16. Tower T2 viewed from the southeast, with tower T1 (in white) at the back in the left

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- 12 The rampart between T1 and T2 appears to have been a double wall (Howard 1989, p. 230). Between T2 and T3 the rampart was a single wall of relatively low height, built in stone. This part of the rampart was additionally defended by another “tower” (T6), actually a stonewall with loopholes built on the summit of a thin crag that stands in the middle of the cirque-like formation C. T6 has a direct view of the ramparts, and soldiers posted there could easily target attackers going over them.
- 13 The inner fort (A) comprises a series of buildings (figs 17, 18), several of which appear to have been residential palace buildings (P1 to P6). P6 seems never to have been completed, as only its foundations can be seen without any trace of a past elevation (fig. 19). There are two temples (Te2 and Te3 on fig. 17) amidst these buildings. Temple 3 was built atop the gate through which the inner fort could be entered from the fortified settlement below (fig. 20). The buildings around the main tower T1 were connected to the palace buildings by a roofed passage (RP on fig. 4).

Figure 17. Overall view of the main fort (A) from the northeast

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Figure 18. View of fort (A) with residential palace buildings P1, P2 and P4 viewed from the northwest

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Figure 19. Foundations of the residential palace building P6 viewed from tower T3

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Figure 20. Temple Te3 viewed from tower T3

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- 14 Finally, the area between the inner fort A and the “arena” D is covered with the ruins of the former fortified settlement (fig. 5). It appears to have consisted of densely packed dwellings, arranged in such a way that the outer edge of the settlement presented a contiguous wall (which is quite usual in Ladakhi fortified settlements). This protected area B against attacks coming from the west.

Dating and chronology of the complex

- 15 Rabtan Lhatse Khar is the result of a long development. Though we lack physical dating (such as C14) to properly assess the full chronology of the site, we can rely on several elements to form an idea of how long the fortress was used. Indeed, in the surroundings of the complex, numerous ancient chortens can be noticed, among which a passageway chorten along one of the footpaths leading to the fort shelters paintings from the 11th-13th century period³. This would indicate that a fortification was already in use at that time.
- 16 The three temples found within the walls of the fortress appear to have been developed between the second half of the 15th century and the mid-16th century, indicating a period of active use of the site⁴.
- 17 Rabtan Lhatse Khar withstood the siege of the armies of the Fifth Dalai Lama during the war of 1681-1683, indicating that it was in use until at least then. However, when Moorcroft visited Basgo during his stay in Ladakh from 1820 to 1822 (i.e. before the destruction caused by the Dogras), the complex was in ruin: “The town was perched upon the face of a rock, and was formerly defended by works to the east and west, which were now in ruins. This is the case with all similar structures in Ladakh, and argues either a feeling of security or the poverty of the state” (Moorcroft & Trebeck 1841, p. 3). The site must therefore have been abandoned quite some time before 1820.
- 18 In summary, there was probably already a fortification at this location in the 11th-13th century, and possibly before that, which was used until at least the late 17th century but not after the late 18th century. Beyond these dating elements, a rich chronology can be observed throughout the complex.
- 19 The site is indeed very heterogeneous in terms of construction techniques and materials. Various styles of stone masonry are used, comprising archaic-looking walls made of cobblestones, usual random texture stonewalls, and elaborate semi-ashlar masonry (the “banded texture masonry” in Howard’s publications, which consists of courses of regular size stones that alternate with thin courses of small stones: see fig. 21). These different styles of masonry and their very different states of preservation point to numerous stages of construction, and would require more detailed research in order to accurately situate them in time.

Figure 21. Example of semi-ashlar or banded texture masonry, here in Bod Kharbu. Courses of regular size stones alternate with thin courses of small stones

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- 20 Rammed earth was used in Basgo for several of the main buildings such as P1 and P2, and for several of the towers. Whereas in some sites different techniques of rammed earth construction can be observed (e.g. in Chigtan), in Basgo the various rammed earth buildings appear to have all been built in the same fashion, suggesting a single stage of construction. Finally, bricks can be seen throughout the site. Several sizes of bricks and various brick bonds can be observed, suggesting several stages of use of this material.
- 21 Though a detailed chronology of these various phases is impossible to elaborate in the current state of research, a basic outline can be tentatively sketched out. The structures that appear to be the oldest seem to have been in stone. Examples are the very dilapidated structures in the “arena” D (such as T4 and T5), with P5 as another example. This building is the result of several stages of (re)construction and extensions (fig. 22). The lowest level discernable – which appears to be the foundations of a much smaller former building – is in cobblestones, which is rather rare in Ladakh and mostly seen in buildings from before the Namgyal dynasty (16th-19th centuries). It can be assumed that several phases of stone construction are to be distinguished within this earliest period.

Figure 22. Close-up view of the residential palace building P5 from tower T3

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- 22 Next in the chronology seems to be a period of use of rammed earth. A significant number of buildings appear to have been built at once in a coherent planning of the defences, suggesting a major upgrade of the complex. Though the use of outpost towers is uncertain for previous periods, the fact that OT2 is in rammed earth shows that by then the use of such outposts became part of the defensive strategy of the complex.
- 23 Then, probably as a consequence of war, several of the rammed earth structures underwent destruction. The damaged walls were repaired with mud bricks, as can clearly be seen in P1 (fig. 23).

Figure 23. Elevation of the residential palace building P1 from the northwest

© Quentin Devers, 2015

- 24 Finally, the buildings that appear to be the most recent use stone masonry for their lower floors and mud brick for the upper ones. Stonewalls are often reinforced with timber rings (a feature not seen in previous periods), and several are semi-ashlar in style. These buildings are usually significantly larger than those from earlier phases. Within this general period, numerous stages of construction can be distinguished again.

Conclusion

- 25 Rabtan Lhatse Khar follows the usual pattern of large fortified complexes that can be seen all over Ladakh: outer defences, consisting primarily of outpost towers, protect the weak sides of the fortification, whereas inner defences protect a fortified settlement on the lower part of the relief and a fort on the upper and better-defended part of the site, usually through the use of inner and outer ramparts. As is evident from the diversity of construction styles noticeable throughout the Basgo complex, as well as from the rich stratigraphy that can be observed across the numerous elevations still standing, the development of the Rabtan Lhatse Khar is the result of a long process that took place over many centuries. It probably started in the 11th-13th centuries (or possibly even earlier), and lasted until the late 17th to the late 18th century. What differentiates the fortified complex of Basgo from others is the singularity of its topography and of the sediment that forms its relief. These constituted the bases for the construction of one of the most important and most vital fortifications used by the Namgyal dynasty, which provided Rabtan Lhatse Khar with a rare role in the history of Ladakh – such as holding the Titbeto-Mongol invasion of 1681-1683.

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NOTES

1. Moorcroft & Trebeck 1841, p. 3; Cunningham 1854, p. 327; Duncan 1906, pp. 132-133.
2. In the present paper, several of the buildings from Howard's original plan (Howard 1989, p. 229) have been renamed: the north tower is now OT2, the east tower is now T2, the south tower is now T3, the loophole wall C is now T6, the Maitreya temple MT is now Te1, the gSer zañs temple SZ is now Te2, the building E is now Te3, and the building F is now P6.
3. Luczanits has shown that the paintings in this chorten belong to the Alchi style (Luczanits 2005, p. 87, fn 19). Taking into account the disagreements surrounding the dating of this painting style, this chorten can be dated to anywhere from the 11th to the 13th century.
4. The most comprehensive study about the chronology of these three temples was conducted by Jamspal, who suggests the following: 1) the main temple (Te1) was likely initiated by king Drakpabumde (Tib. grags pa 'bum lde) toward the end of the 15th century, but he might have died before its completion; 2) this temple was probably painted by king Tsewang Namgyal (Tib. tshe dbang rnam rgyal) about a century later; 3) the second temple (Te2) appears to have been started by king Jamyang Namgyal (Tib. 'jam dbyang rnam rgyal) at the beginning of the 17th century, but not completed; 4) his wife, known as Gyal Khatun (Tib. rgyal kha tun), seems to have erected the third temple (Te3); 5) finally, their son, Sengge Namgyal (Tib. seng ge rnam rgyal), completed the gilding of the statue inside the second temple (Jamspal 1997).

ABSTRACTS

This short paper aims at revisiting the defences of the fortified complex of Basgo, three decades after they were first studied by Neil Howard in 1989.

Ce court article vise à apporter un nouveau regard sur les défenses du complexe fortifié de Basgo, près de trois décennies après leur première étude par Neil Howard en 1989.

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