Chortens (mchod-rten) in Humla

Observations on the variation of a building type in north-western Nepal in May 1990

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Historical and topographical background

The district of Humla in the north-western corner of Nepal is divided into two territories manifesting distinct cultural differences. Humla thus is structured similarly to the other districts along the Chinese border, namely Mugu, Dolpa, Mustang, Manang, Gorkha and Rasuwa, Dolakha, Solukhumbu. Whereas Gurung, Tamang, Thakali and Thakuri settle in the lower areas of these districts upto a height of 3,000m, Tibetans of various tribal affiliation only start settling above that height, with permanent villages at 3,100 to 3,500 m and temporary settlements (such as Yari beyond Muchu) even higher. Surprisingly, the villages of the Tibetans start at the very topographical situation where the narrow gorges of the large rivers like Karnali or Thakkhola (Kali Gandaki) or Marsyandi open up to form widened valleys. The change in topography goes hand in hand with a change of climate. Several studies have already dealt with these changes in Mustang (Christian Kleinert[2]) and Manang (Perdita Pohle[3]). Both studies assert a dialectic relationship between built form (architecture) and climate — a statement which seems obvious and functionalistic, but which is probably too one—dimensional. Dieter Schuh[4] only recently added a new dimension to the discussion, disclosing on the basis of various documents that the 'territory of the 12 villages' (yul—kha Bcu—gnyis or Baragaon) in southern Mustang demarcated the southern border of a Tibetan kingdom for millennia. It was again colonized by a group speaking a western Tibetan dialect in the 15th century, when King A—ma—dpal erected an independent state in northern Mustang.

Although until now nothing is known about Humla, it might well be suspected that the upper Karnali valley was colonized at the same time, if not in the same context.

There is another striking similarity between the two territories in Mustang and Humla: From Kagbeni upto the Chinese border there extends a row of cave settlements, known under the name of Se—rib, and in existence since the fourth millennium

B.C. A couple of caves around Muchu in Humla (see figure) display the same features as those which have been surveyed by Schuh and his colleagues since 1987 in the valley of the Jhongkhola a few miles east of Kagbeni.

Kermi, situated some 20km northwest of Simikot, is the lowest Tibetan village (see the map), at a height of about 3,100m. Four hours up the valley follow Yalban and Yangar and, on the other side of the Karnali, Puiya and Chala, located along a summer trail leading across the Sankha Pass into the neighbouring district of Bajura.

Another four hours up from Yangar the gorge slowly widens to form a wide valley around Muchu and Tumkot at a height between 3,200 and 3,400 metres. Here, vegetation becomes scarce, the bare slopei signal the advent of the arid zone of inner Asia. Irrigated fields in Muchu seem to be the highest ones in the area, as the path climbs again to lead to the Changla Pass on the way to Lake Mansarowar or along the Karnali to the remote outposts of human habitation at Halji and Limi. Indeed, Kermi, Yangar and Muchu were and still are important points of stop-over for pilgrims on their way to Lake Mansarowar and Mount Kailash. And up until today the total supply for these villages has come from Taklakot in China. Simikot is only visited for administrative purposes and only in rare cases will anybody follow the Karnali for 10 days down to the markets of the Terai in Chisapani or Dhangadhi.

Location of chortens

The seven settlements of northern Humla are of a clustered typy, with 20 to 50 houses. The ground floor serves as a stable for yaks (or chauri) and goats; the upper floor houses the fireplace, around which people sleep, and several wooden boxes to store wheat (the main crop) and imported rice.

Monasteries (nep. gumbas) are integrated into the cluster of houses (as at Kermi), located at the periphery of the settlement (as in Muchu) or are placed at a distance from the village at topographically dominant places, such as on the brow of Tumkot Hill. Chortens are located apart from the monasteries, mostly along paths leading into villages or on hilltops. Three simple cubes of quarry stones, placed in a row, mark the western entrance of Kermi. In Yalban one elaborate chorten marks the eastern access, while a second one is placed on a small hilltop above the village. In Yangar the situation is quite similar. Here, one chorten marks the eastern entrance, while another one stands in the middle of the cluster of houses (see photograph), and three others in the fields below the village. In Muchu, the most prominent chorten is placed on a ridge demarcating the northern edge of the village, while some 6-8 chortens are scattered over the ridges and hilltops of the gentle slope south of the village. In Tumkot a couple of small chortens line the path up the hill into the village.

In no case does the location of a chorten harbour a specific meaning nor does there seem to be a hierarchy among them. In most cases they are located along the path in such a way, that passage is provided on two sides and that they may be circumambulated. But even that is not necessarily the case, as an example from Yalban exemplifies.

Architectural features

The *chorten at Kermi* (see drawing) represents the most simple type: A cube of

square ground plan measuring 136 by 140 cm is placed on a small plinth and covered by one layer of flat stones which project slightly as if to form a roof. From the centre of the cube emerges the srog-sin, considered to be the tree of life (lit. srog – life, sin – tree),[5] as the most important element of the structure. The roof of the chorten serves as a kind of repository for stones inscribed with the sacred formula 'om mani – padme hum'. Besides stones, the horns and foreheads of yaks are placed here, in the same way inscribed with the sacred formula,

The chorten at the ridge of *Muchu* (*B*) is basically of the same type as the one at Kermi: A cube based on a square of 180cm is placed on a double-stepped plinth, with three srog-sins emerging from the flat top. In this case, not the roof but the cube itself serves as the repository, as it encloses a chamber filled with tsha-tsha offerings. These offerings are introduced into the inner chamber through a small opening in the eastern facade. Originally, this opening was much larger and had features of a window, of which the wooden frame remains. The sill of the frame serves as a tie beam, which continues around the entire building to ensure stability to the walls around the chamber, as they were built without any mortar. Two more of such tie beams mark the top of the cube, introducing in addition modest decoration through a stringcourse of circles.

The other chorten in *Muchu* (*A*) (see drawing) is placed on a ridge bordering the path north of the village. Here, the place seems to have been determined purposefully, as the three-storeyed chorten encloses a chamber on the lowest level where the imprint of a left foot is manifested on the bare rock. Regardless of the Buddhist context of the superstructure, villagers maintain that this is the imprint of Siva's foot, who is said to have once passed through this region. Nevertheless this chamber serves also as a repository, mainly for printed folios of Tibetan manuscripts. As a special feature, each of the two lower storeys of the chorten incorporates a separate plinth to provide the form of a four-stepped structure. The storeys, however, may clearly be identified by the tie beams on top which provide the necessary stability. The second storey is topped by a projecting roof consisting of a double layer of tie beams with a layer of brushwood in between. Surprisingly, and in variation of the aforementioned examples, another cube is placed on top, of this roof, appearing to represent the harmika (tib. pu-su), from which the srog-sin emerges.

The *chorten in Yalban* presents a type which mixes features of the two examples from Muchu: It is two-storeyed and rests on a plinth with four steps towards the path leading into the village and two steps on the other side, where the fields extend towards the building. The base storey is square in ground plan but less high, producing squat proportions. Tie beams surround the base at three levels, with the ends of the uppermost level, which supports a sloping roof, projecting some 25 cm. Rows of pinewood logs are placed on this level, stabilized by the weight of stone slabs which are covered by mud to produce a slight slope. In the centre rises a second storey, again a cube of squat proportions, topped by a tie beam. From this cube emerges the essential srog-sin. In contrast to the examples from Mnchu, this chorten does not have an inner chamber, only a niche facing south instead of the usual east, probably to take advantage of the path on the western

side. The niche houses a relief picture in red stone, depicting the classic type of a Tibetan chorten as described by Tucci[6], Schwalbe[7] and others. Another movable blueish stone is placed on the lowest level of tie beams with another depiction of that classic type of chorten.

Conclusions

The chortens of Humla represent a type quite different from those observed in neighbouring Mugu, in Mustang or Solukhumbu. In Mugu, for example, there are a number of large two- or three-storeyed chortens with slanting roofs and the walls artistically plastered. In Humla, there is not a single large structure, only altogether some twenty small chortens. These are basically cubes with one or several trees of life emerging from the top. A larger cube on top of the base storey does not necessarily represent a harmika, which normally is placed on the dome of a chaitya. It might rather represent a second storey or a tier of a tapering building type like the pagodas in the Kathmandu Valley, in China or Japan.

Only at the eastern end of the Himalayan range, in Bhutan, do we find chortens (see drawing: an example from Rukubji) similar to those in Humla. Two-storeyed structures with tie beams are placed on multi-stepped plinths, with rows of slate inscribed with sacred formulas. The tree of life, however, is represented by a moulded stone column emerging from the top for only 20-40 cm.

The base cube tends to enclose a chamber, which serves as a repository of sacred things, and this represents the very essence of a chorten (lit: mchod= offering; rten= receptacle or support). In fact, once placed into such a repository or receptacle, an offering like the folio of a manuscript or a tsha-tsha will never loose its sacred character. Tucci said that these repositories are meant for all those objects "the living sense of sacer (Latin for sacred) guiding all... actions forbids to destroy."[8] In Muchu, the tsha-tsha offerings were exclusively miniature chortens.

As the examples from Kermi and also Yangar (see photograph) show, a chamber is not an essential feature. The platform of the roof may likewise serve as a repository for sacred objects.

Finally, one might sum up by saying that the chorten of Humla is reduced to a cube with the tree of life emerging from it. The cube thus is reduced to its bare function as a support for the tree of life, which in a way also represents the axis mundi.

Surprisingly, the classical chorten type with the four bases, support of the pentola, the pentola (or dome), the upper portion, the turret, the tree of life, the thirteen wheels, and the umbrella, which can be seen at Svayambhunath, in Solukhumbu, in Bhutan and all over Tibet, appears in Humla only in the form of reliefs. It may only be a question of time before the tradition of building archaic types is given up and the classic form of chorten introduced, representing an import from the high traditions. In 1988, for example, a new chorten was built in Tumkot with a carved srog-sin. The terminal portional of this srog-sin, for the first time in Humla, displays the sun, moon and pinnacle (or golden drop) presupposing the doctrines of the Tantric schools: "The sun is cosmic activity, moon the object realized by the first and fire is the knowing object."[9] This srog-sin appears to indicate the beginning of a major change in building traditions.

Notes

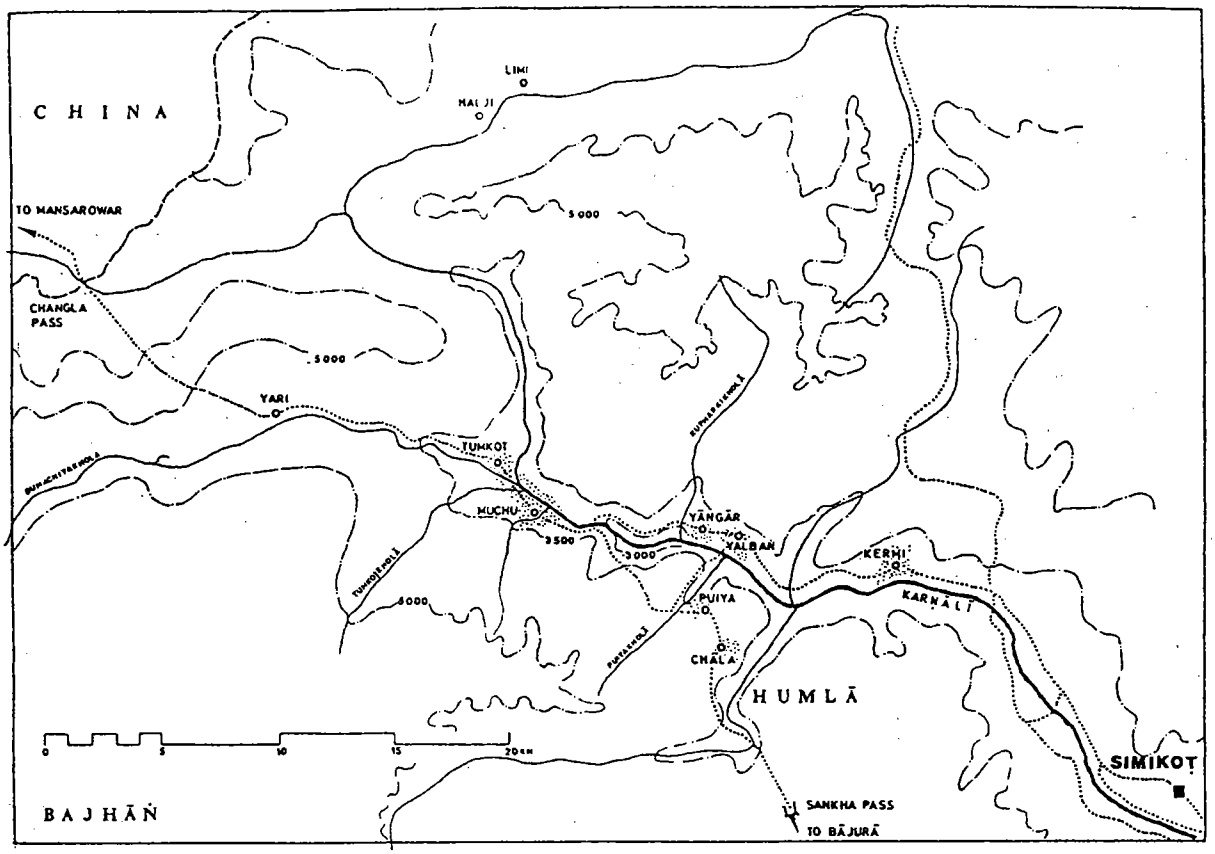
1. The villages of Humla were visited from

18th-20th May 1990 to complement a more complex study of Nepalese chaitya architecture, which is based on an extensive survey in the valley of Kathmandu, but tries to present a preliminary overview of building types from the northern districts. –Birat Thapa from HMG, Department of Archaeology was an ever present assistant on this misson.

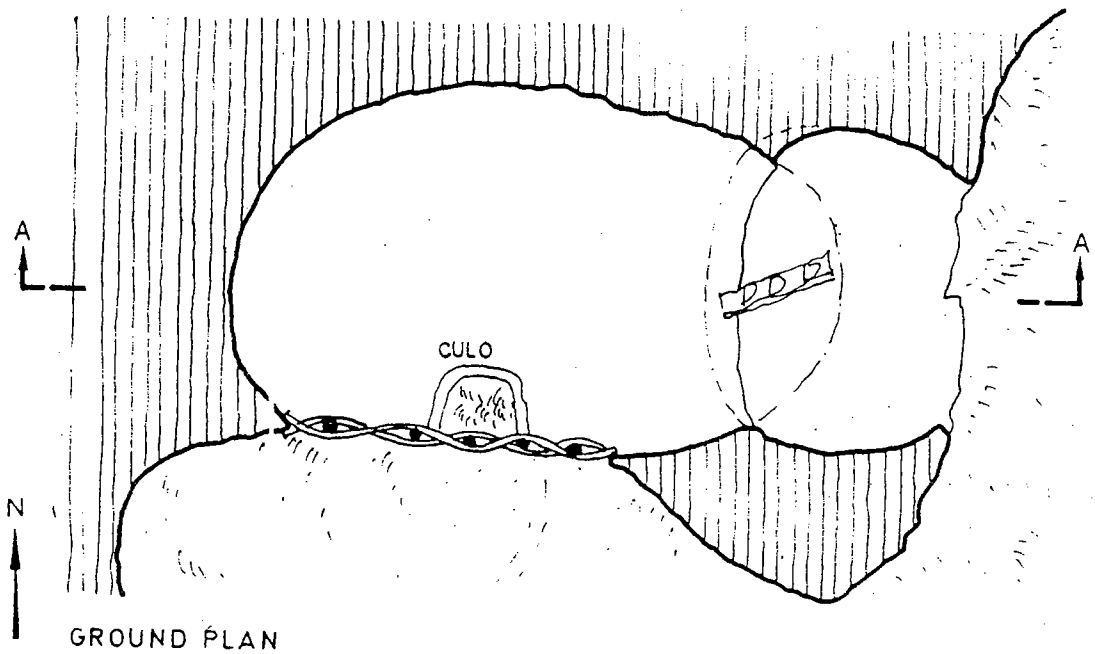
2. Christian Kleinert, Haus-und Siedlungsformen im Nepal Himalaya unter Berucksichtigung klimatischer Faktoren, Innsbruck-Munchen 1973
3. Perdita Pohle, L'adaption de la maison et de l'habitat a l'environnement de la haute montagne. Etude du district de Manang dans l' Himalaya nepalais. – In: Architecture, Milieu et Societe en Himalaya, Denis Blamont, Gerard Toffin (ed), Etude Himalayenne No. 1, Paris 1987, p. 79-102
4. Dieter Schuh, The political organisation of Southern Mustang during the 17th and 18th centuries. – In: Ancient Nepal
5. Giuseppe Tucci, Stupa - art, architectonics and symbolism (English version of Indo-Tibetica I), New Delhi 1988, p. 40
6. op. cit., p. 40-43
7. Kurt J. Schwalbe, The construction and religious meaning of the Buddhist Stupa in Solo Khumbu, Nepal, Ph. D. dissertation, Berkeley 1979
8. Tucci, op. cit., p. 38
9. Tucci, op. cit,, p. 48

HUMLA:
Above: Chörten in Muchu. Below: Opening in the western facade of that chörten to insert tsha-tsha, votive offerings in the form of a stūpa.

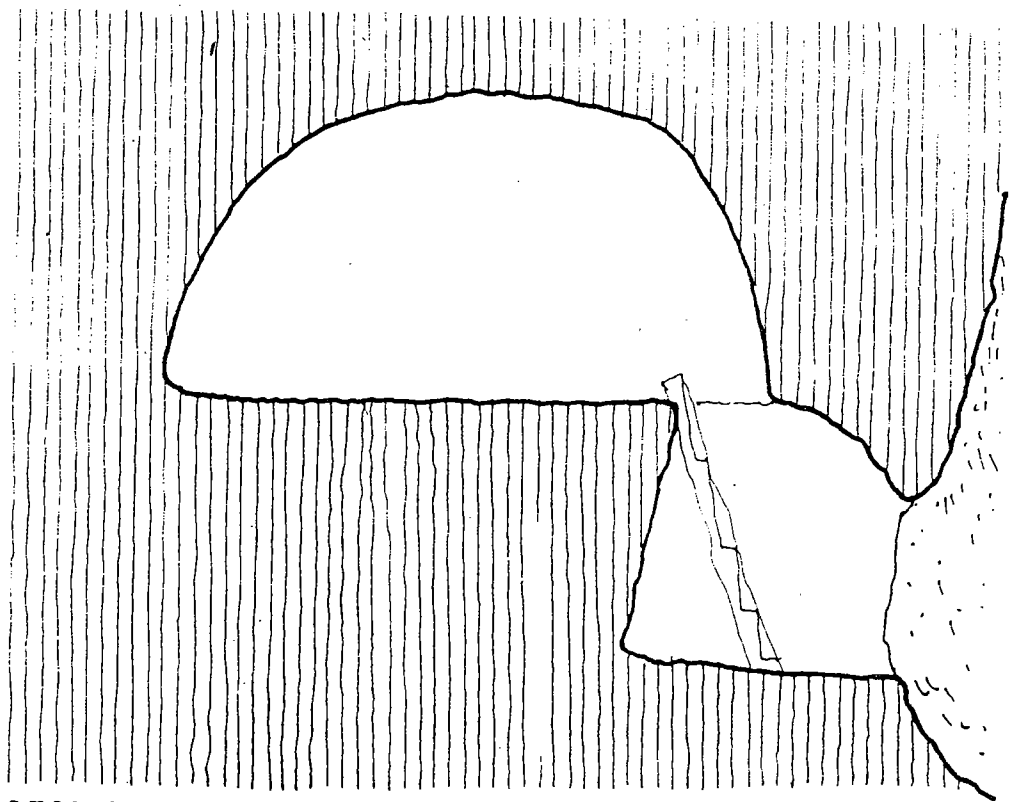
HUMLĀ:
Above: Chörten in Kermi .- Below: Chörten in Muchu



HUMLĀ: Northern part of the district . Location of those 10 villages north of Simikot in which the Tibetan population builds chōrtens.



GROUND PLAN



SECTION A-A

CAVE AT TUMKOṬ

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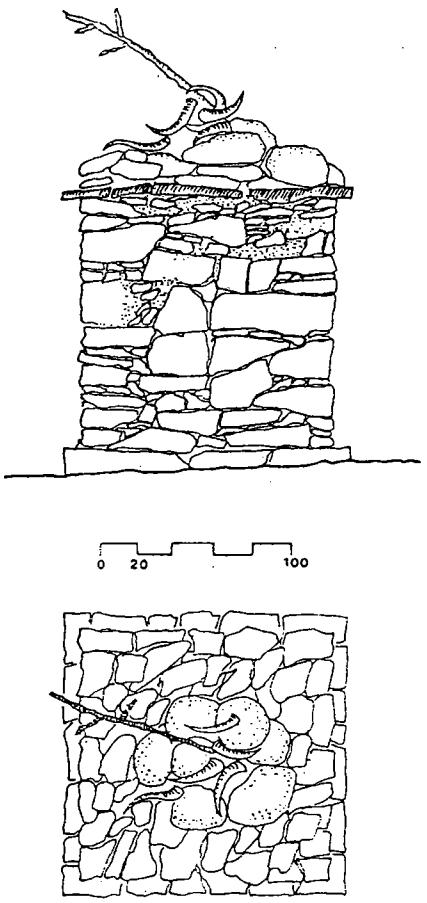
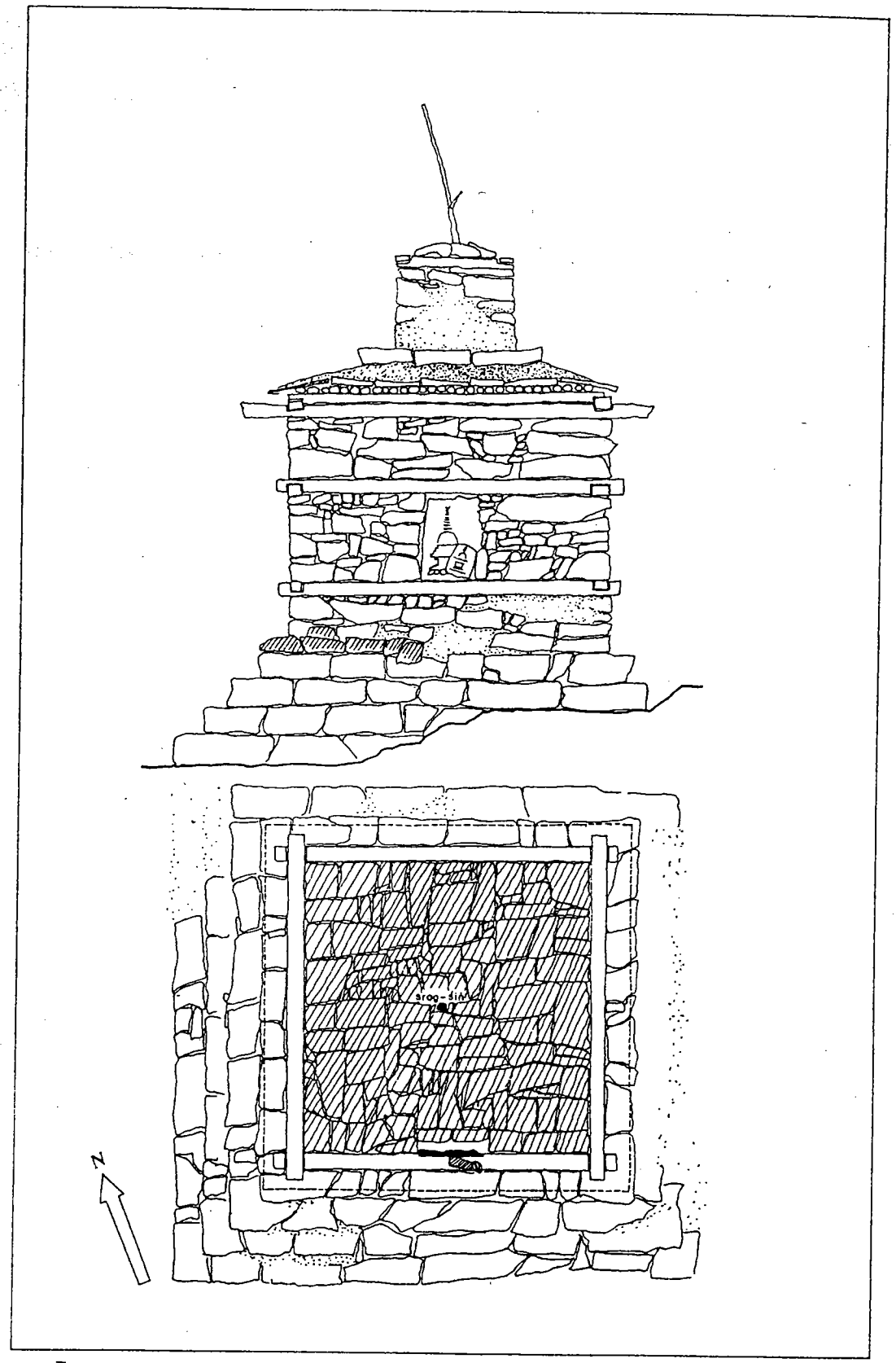
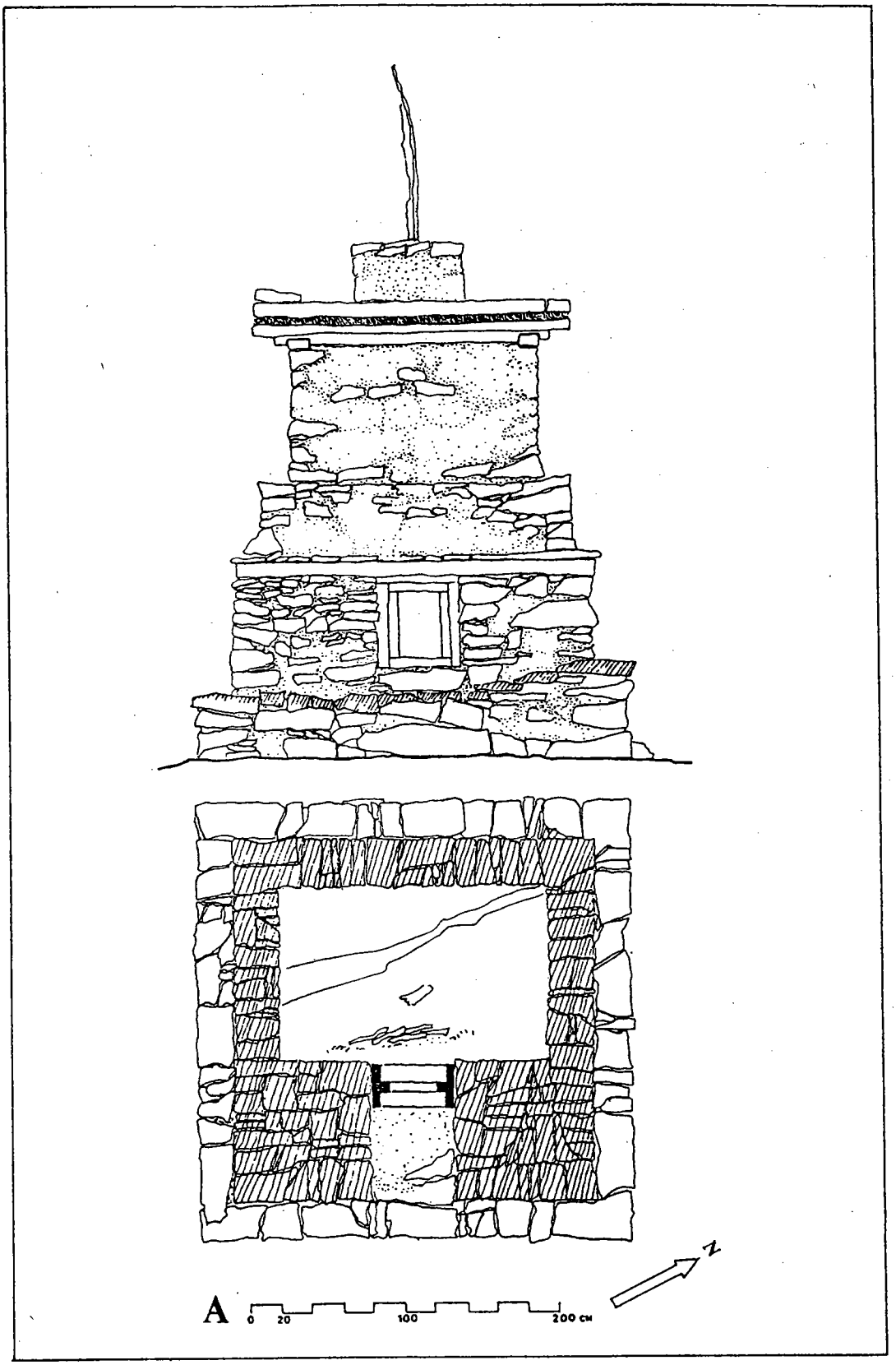


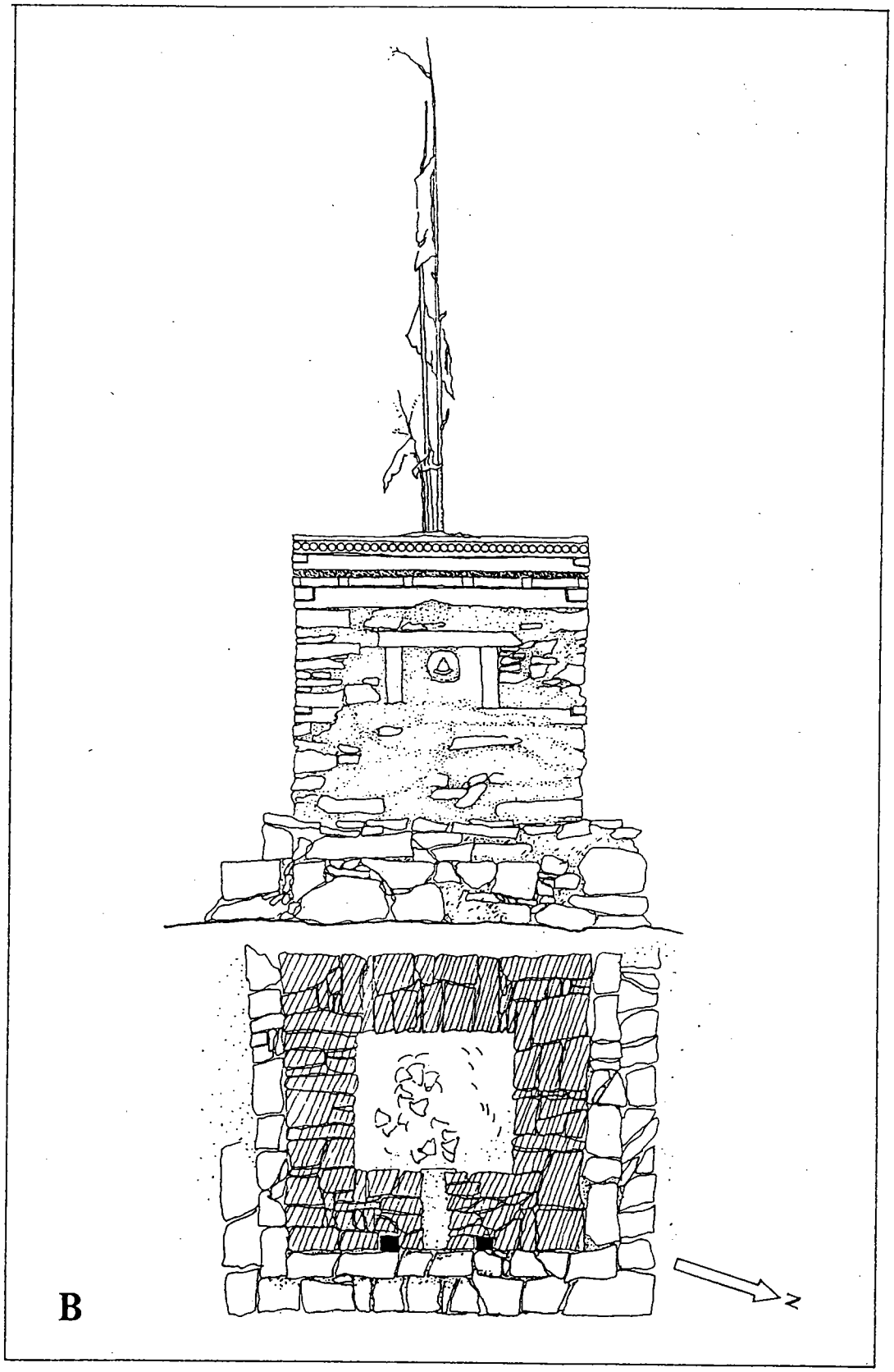
HUMLĀ: Chörten in Kermi, elevation north and top view, scale 1:40



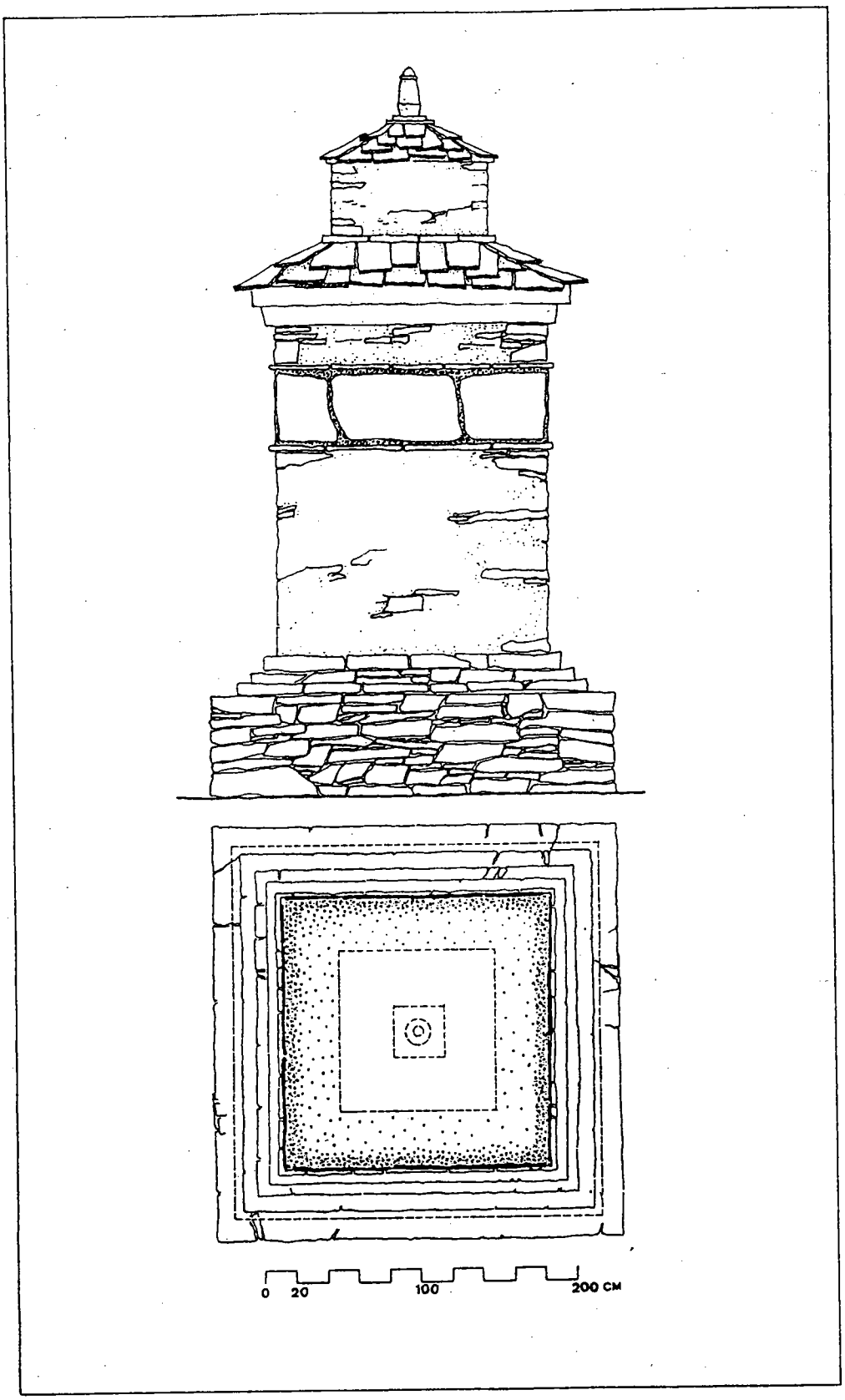
HUMLĀ: Chörten in Yalbaṅ, elevation south and ground plan, scale 1:40



HUMLĀ: Chörten in Muchu, elevation southeast and ground plan, scale 1:40



HUMLĀ: Chörten in Muchu, elevation east and ground plan , scale 1:40



BHUTAN: Chörten in Rukubji,elevation west and ground plan, scale 1:40