

## Introduction

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The First International Conference on Spiti was held in Oxford under the auspices of the Tibetan and Himalayan Studies Cluster at Wolfson College on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of May, 2016. Dedicated entirely to the Indo-Tibetan border valley of Spiti, the conference, entitled *Recovering the Past and Exploring the Present*, welcomed scholars and researchers from the fields of archaeology, history, linguistics, architecture, art conservation, anthropology, and art history (fig.1). At the end of two intensive and rewarding days, it was decided to produce a volume of the conference proceedings that would best illustrate Spiti's past and present cultural heritage. In the following, a selection of fifteen papers introduces the latest research findings presented during the conference.



Fig. 1 — Delegates of the First International Conference on Spiti, Wolfson College, Oxford, 7<sup>th</sup> May, 2016. Photo: Louise Gordon, 2016.

The sometimes raw or limited data discussed in this volume reflect local trends and experience. The new data sets address various topical subdivisions and chronological boundaries, allowing authors to interpret them vis-à-vis the formation and decline of regional powers, social structures, and artistic trends, as well as patterns of mobility, including long-distance trade and pilgrimage. While no general overview can be offered at this stage, this represents an opportunity for future scholarship. More research is needed in order to better define cultural and political patterns of continuity and change, thereby avoiding excessive generalisation.

Several reasons may be offered to explain the current state of the art and the difficulties entailed in making sense of the Spitian past as a whole. The first teams of researchers and academics arrived in Spiti in the late 80s and early 90s, with the official opening of the district to tourism in 1992. From the start, research focused on the site of Tabo. Established in 996, the monastic complex and translation centre at Tabo has come to represent a paragon of early Buddhist art and architecture as well as a repository for some of the earliest canonical literature preserved in the Tibetan world. During the following decade, fieldwork conducted in Spiti concentrated almost exclusively on the art of the later spread of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*) and on the philological and epigraphic analyses of manuscripts and inscriptions found at Tabo. The arrival of the first anthropologists and linguists eventually made it possible to enhance our understanding of the socio-economic conditions and dialects of the valley. Yet again, Tabo was selected as a reference point from which data were collected and conclusions drawn. Recalling her earlier observations, linguist Veronika Hein underlines in the present volume that the 'Tabo Tibetan', a term coined by her a decade ago, is in effect not different from the Tibetic language spoken throughout the valley. If there is no question that Tabo assumed a preeminent position within the cultural and religious history of the Indo-Tibetan border regions up until the seventeenth century, it is also certain that the lay and monastic community of Tabo dwindled to near non-existence in later times. In fact, the village of Tabo was composed of only four households and a handful of monks by the turn of the eighteenth century. By contrast, the former capital of Spiti, Dangkhar, comprised seventeen households between 1790 and 1850, while the large village of Kyibar at the foot of the Parang Pass had twenty (Schuh 2016).

Early research on the history of Spiti necessarily reflected the position of the border valley within the Indian subcontinent (fig.2).

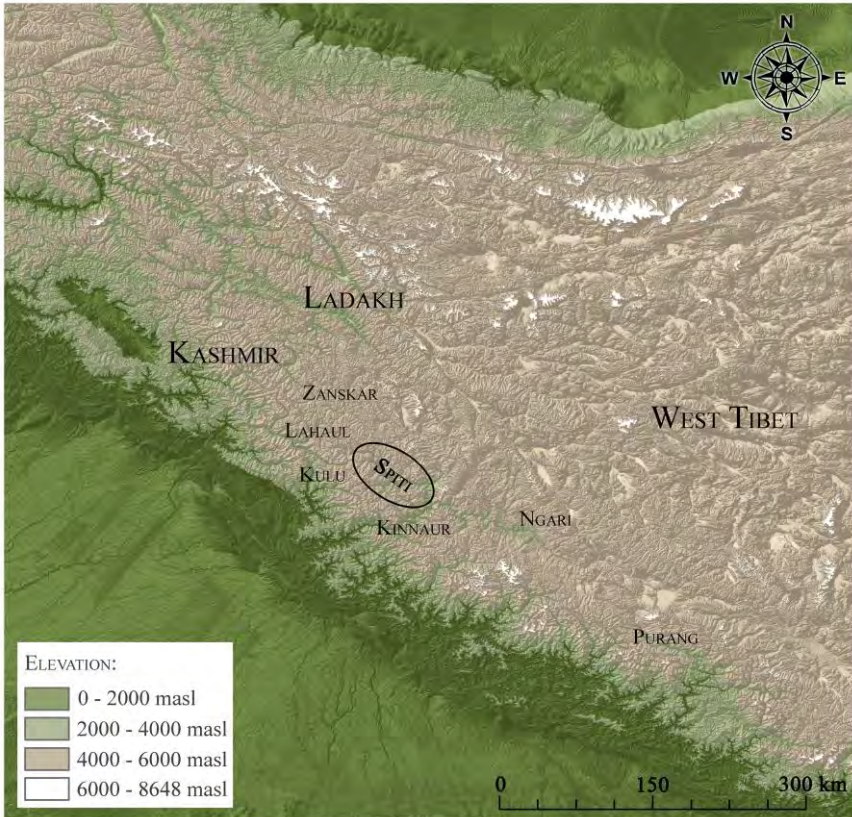


Fig. 2 — Map of North-Western India and location of Spiti within the Western Himalayan region. Map: Yannick Laurent, 2017.

Located in the western margins of the Tibetan plateau, Spiti assumed marginal status relative to its most powerful and ambitious neighbours such as Ladakh, Bashahr-Kinnaur, Kashmir, and British India. As such, historical sources until recently have rarely focused on Spiti *per se*. When primary sources written in Tibetan are examined, the view they offer is often from the periphery. In this regard, Luciano Petech's contribution to the study of the Western Himalayas provided a broad historical outline of region. In his monumental monograph – now in need of revision – on *The Kingdom of Ladakh* (1977), *Ya -Ts'e, Gu-ge, Pu-rañ: A New Study*

(1980), and *Western Tibet: Historical Introduction* (1997), Spiti was relegated to a district of lesser importance the control of which was an object of dispute within a larger geopolitical context. New historical documents and epigraphic evidence retrieved from Spiti now make it possible to fill in some of the blanks left by globalizing historical narratives. Our knowledge of the history of Spiti, however, remains incomplete, with whole periods glossed over or simply unreported upon in extant historical sources.

No discipline is an island entire to itself. In this respect, Tibetan and Himalayan studies ought to be at the forefront of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary undertakings. The contributions presented in this volume give an exciting overview of the rich historical, material, and visual cultures of Spiti. Beyond providing us with new ways to think about Spiti, the perspectives offered should be of interest to all students and scholars from the sub-disciplines involved within the field of Tibetology. For the sake of clarity, the fifteen papers of these proceedings have been arranged chronologically and thematically insofar as possible.

The earliest documentation of the region in the west went hand in hand with the activities of the East India Company and the annexation of Spiti by British India in 1846. Early travellers, British officials, natural scientists, and Christian missionaries started to put down in writing their observations about the valley and its inhabitants. An impressive body of accounts and reports eventually paved the way for the pioneering works of A.H. Francke (1914), H.L. Shuttleworth, and G. Tucci (1935). Of these three, Shuttleworth's research received the least attention, and with good reason, as most of his unpublished papers have been confined in the India Office Records and Private Papers kept at the British Library in London. After a close examination of Shuttleworth's archives, Yannick Laurent (pp. 1-55) returns to the life and work of the Indian Civil Servant who in the mid-1930s was working on writing the first ever *History of Spiti*.

In the absence of archaeological investigations, the history of Spiti prior to its Buddhist inception is largely unknown. The study of rock art in the form of petroglyphs and pictographs has helped to define the contours of an early cultural history of the region, bridging both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist eras. Towards this end, John Bellezza and his team (pp. 56-85) documented a large number of sites throughout the valley; as a result, they are able to offer introductory remarks on

the visual and symbolic aspects of early rock art. Their analysis is complemented by field research conducted by a team of social anthropologists and archaeologists from India. In light of the recent improvement of infrastructure and ongoing civil works in the region, Ekta Singh and her colleagues (pp. 86-102) raise concerns about the preservation of rock art sites, several of which are currently under threat due to hydroelectric development projects.

It may be useful to recall that the border valley known today as Spiti is in fact pronounced by its inhabitants as Piti. Different Tibetan spellings and Tibetic languages spoken in the Western Himalayas help to explain this trend. A decade after Lobsang Shastri's review of this term (2007), Nyenthar's paper in this volume (pp. 103-110) returns to the different spellings and compounds adopted in literary sources and epigraphic material throughout the centuries. The language spoken in Spiti is further discussed by Veronika Hein (pp. 111-127) whose linguistic research on phonology and morphology is complemented by a study of the oral tradition.

After several years spent studying the socio-economic conditions and taxation system of Spiti, social anthropologist Christian Jahoda (pp. 128-159) now tackles the important issue of clans and social stratification based on Francke and Gergan's earlier observations. Kinship groups and patrilineal lineages, while traceable to the late tenth and eleventh centuries, prove more difficult to identify in later periods. The reasons as to why clans lost their relevance over time remain conjectural at this stage; they might be explained with reference to the evolution of a territorial organisation and taxation system more tightly centred on the household allotment. In this volume, Dorje Rinchen reviews the traditional landholding system of Spiti (pp. 160-180). The social-economic distinction between large households (*khang chen*) and small households (*khang chung*) is further discussed in light of the political control exerted by the Kingdom of Ladakh after the mid-seventeenth century.

Research projects on Buddhist architecture in the Western Himalayas have been carried out with a deft hand by the Graz University of Technology over the last fifteen years. Herein, Carmen Auer's paper (pp. 181-201) in this collection discusses the monastic centres and temples at Tabo, Dangkhari, and Lhalung. According to the international Venice Charter of 1964, a comprehensive architectural documentation constitutes a mandatory step towards the conservation and restoration of historic buildings. Moreover, it is

an indispensable prerequisite for the art historical and religious historical analysis of Buddhist edifices. The benefits of attending to this necessity are amply apparent in the three following papers, in which architectural documentation, conservation work, and art historical analysis converge, offering a more detailed representation of the monuments in specific cultural and historical contexts.

In an effort to help document the present state of the mural paintings and statues of the entire Tabo monastic complex, Amy Heller (pp. 202-225) draws specific attention to the 'Maṅḍala Temple' -- one of the most enigmatic edifices within the monastic complex. With a fresh eye towards understanding its history and successive iconographic programs, Heller presents new findings spurred by the use of infrared photography. Her project presents evidence for the mid-eleventh century dating of the structure, while also explaining successive phases of embellishment during the Gelugpa revival in the mid-fifteenth century.

Trekking high above the upper Spiti Valley to the hamlet of Tashigang, Gerald Kozicz (pp. 226-248) delves into a visual reconstruction of a large fifteenth century 'gateway' *stūpa* and chapel, providing a possible explanation for the spatial interaction between the structure's iconographic program and the sacred geography of its landscape.

Mélodie Bonnat (pp. 249-270) brings to the fore issues of conservation and restoration as experienced in her work on a set of seventeenth-century murals found at Kungri village in the Pin Valley. In concert with Namgyal Henry's own religious history of the site, Bonnat's paper offers a detailed report of the site's present condition. It provides as well a discussion of the methods and successes made in revealing paintings that had been covered by soot in the wake of a fire that occurred more than a century and half ago. Following on the conservation report, Namgyal Henry's paper (pp. 271-290) investigates a highly unusual yet historically critical transmission of Pema Lingpa's (*padma gling pa*) tradition in the far Western Himalayan region. As this treasure tradition is typically found in Bhutan and Southern Tibet, the discovery of it in Western Tibet raises many questions as to its particular history, which is so far removed from more common sites and sources. Henry's investigation follows both textual as well as oral histories found in Kungri to help explain how such a tradition arose so far away from its point of origin.

Shifting gears slightly, we encounter in papers by Patrick

Sutherland and Pascale Dollfus the tradition of itinerant Buchen performers well known by locals and tourist alike. The Buchen are ritual and religious practitioners, actors and storytellers from the Pin Valley. Widely known for performing the Ceremony of the Breaking of the Stone the itinerant performers work as ritualist, exorcists, and healers who travel the villages of Spiti, Upper Kinnaur, and parts of Ladakh to spread the message and teachings of the Buddha through the medium of entertainment. As a reportage photographer, Patrick Sutherland (pp. 291-322) documents the material culture of the Buchen performers, with special attention to their narrative and ritual texts, painted thangkhas, musical instruments, statues, costumes, masks, and ritual objects that Buchen utilise. Beyond this archival work, Sutherland records his conversations pertaining to the history and ownership of these objects, relating family memories which give further insight into the social history of both the objects and their connections to the Buchen themselves.

Among their many performative religious trades, the Buchen are professional storytellers whose repertoire not only contains the famous mantra of Avalokiteśvara (*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*), but also dozens of biographies that belong to the Tibetan Buddhist repertoire. Following Sutherland's work, Pascale Dollfus (pp. 323-348) contextualizes the Buchen in greater detail and looks specifically at their narratives in the context of a shifting social landscape brought on by modern realities where entertainment is more readily valued over religious efficacy.

Finally, returning to a larger perspective of the region, the paper by Diana Lange (349-371) examines part of a set of mid-nineteenth century maps commissioned by the British official William Edmund Hay. The maps show various routes into the Spiti Valley from Western Tibet. Only part of a larger whole, the maps are filled with notations and imagery which are not always discernible. Lange suggests how we might "decode" and better "read" these documents in the context of the larger set from which they come, drawing upon the perceptions and representations put forth by the original monastic map maker who travelled across the Tibetan plateau.

In closing, it is with great pleasure that we make available this volume of proceedings as free PDF downloads thanks to the generous and leading *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*. We very much look forward to the research on Spiti that will likely be sparked through this online publication. In the meantime, we would like to thank

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