The *Maṇḍala* Temple of Tabo: A Reassessment of the Chronology based on Tibetan Historic Inscriptions and the Iconography of the Mural Paintings

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In 2010, the late Venerable Geshe Sonam Wangdu, Abbot of Tabo and Venerable Lama Zangpo, Head Administrator of Tabo, requested my help to document the present state of the mural paintings and statues of the entire monastic complex in view of long-term conservation. Accompanied by Luigi Fieni, painting conservator and professional photographer, duly authorized by the Archaeological Survey of India, we attempted to fulfil their request. This documentation was intended to shed light on the continuous deterioration of the unique mural paintings and clay sculptures due to water damage and seismic tremors. As of 1997, the main sanctuaries were meticulously photographed and studied thanks to the multidisciplinary publication of *Tabo a Lamp for the Kingdom* by Deborah Klimburg-Salter, with contributions by Christian Luczanits, Luciano Petech, Ernst Steinkellner and Erna Wandl.[1] However, the monks were aware of subsequent deterioration needing architectural and painting conservation. Also, among the temples of Tabo, very few photographs of the paintings and none of the historic inscriptions of the *Maṇḍala* Temple (*dkyil khang, dkyil 'khor lha khang)* had previously been published. Although the murals are indeed damaged, technological advances in photography yielded good results. In the hope of contributing towards a better understanding of the history and successive iconographic programs at Tabo, particularly in the *dkyil khang*, this study will present photographic data of murals and inscriptions as well as observations on the iconographic analysis of the mandalas by considering their iconography within the historic context of murals in Guge Puhrang and Ladakh. This gives a more nuanced chronological framework for

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[1]   Klimburg-Salter, D.E. 1997. *Tabo a Lamp for the Kingdom.* Milano: Skira Editore.

the *dkyil khang* and its murals.

It is salient to review the most significant previous research on the *dkyil khang* in historic progression in order to situate our hypothesis of the foundation and iconographic program of the *dkyil khang*. In 1909, Francke succinctly stated, "The *dkyil khang* is a picture hall behind the preceding (i.e. the *gser khang*). As the roof is not water-tight, the pictures have suffered much through leakage. The principal picture shows Rnam par snang mdzad, but I could discover no inscriptions in it".[2] Genuine historical documentation began in 1933 when Tucci discovered a few historic inscriptions which he first published in 1935 in *Indo-Tibetica*.[3] Like Francke, he started his brief description by deploring the state of conservation, "The *dkyil khang* is one of the smallest chapels, one of the remotest and worst preserved. The paintings which cover it are not very ancient, maybe they belong to the XVIIth century, when, probably by the work of the kings of Ladakh, the whole of the monastery of Tabo was rebuilt or modernized". He further discussed the initiation function of the *maṇḍala*s in the *dkyil khang*, a function complementary to the assembly hall. Inside the temple Tucci identified a group of three portraits of monks as members of the Guge royal family: *pho brang gtsug pa byang chu 'od*, *bla ma zhi ba 'od*, and *lha ma yi shes 'od*, i.e. Byang chub 'od, responsible for the renovation of Tabo 1041-2, his younger brother the illustrious translator Zhi ba 'od, and their uncle, the scion of the Guge dynasty, the sovereign Ye shes 'od.[4] Tucci discussed a painting representing buildings where he recorded the few historic inscriptions he could read, notably on the north wall, *tho gling gser khang gi dkod pa* (bkod pa), "plan of the Gser khang of Tholing" and *ta bo rgyan gtsug lag khang gi dkod pa*, "ground plan of the temple, ornament of Tabo". Tucci concurred with Francke's analysis of a mural devoted to Vairocana, he additionally identified a *maṇḍala* devoted to Akṣobhya, stating that the third *maṇḍala* cannot be deciphered, although he did publish a photograph of it.[5] In

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2 Francke, A.H. 1914 [1972]. *Antiquities of Indian Tibet, Part I: Personal Narrative*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, vol. XXXVIII, p.42.

3 Tucci, G. 1935. *Indo-Tibetica III. I Templi del Tibet occidentale e il loro simbolismo artistico, Parte I. Spiti e Kunavar*. Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, pp.109-113. (translation Vesci, U.M. 1988. *The Temples of Western Tibet and their Artistic Symbolism*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan).

4 Tucci, G. ibid. plate LVIII.

5 Tucci, G. *ibid*. p p.109-113.

subsequent decades, relatively scant additional research has concentrated on the iconographic program of this chapel due to the poor state of conservation of the murals;[6] instead, the temple was investigated in terms of architectural context and textual documentation. Romi Khosla (1979) gave detailed architectural data and quoted Tucci's chronological assessment of the murals.[7] Roberto Vitali (1996) historically identified two large important portraits of Dge lugs pa monks: on the south wall, Tsong kha pa (1357-1419),[8] the founder of the Dge lugs pa monastic order and on the north wall, Lha dbang blo gros (1388–1462),[9] "glorified ... as founder of temples at Tabo"[10] (Fig. 1a: portrait of Lha dbang blo gros and Fig. 1b: wall of Lha dbang blo gros portrait). Vitali also reviewed the historical inscriptions under the buildings on the north wall; his reading and translation differ considerably from Tucci's assessment.[11]

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6   Handa, O.C. 1994. *Tabo Monastery and Buddhism in the Trans-Himalaya: A Thousand Years of Existence of the Tabo chos khor*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing, p.161; Klimburg-Salter, *op.cit.* p.66, and illustration fig.58, the protectress rdo rje chen mo, *Maṇḍala* temple, East wall, above entrance. P.van Ham, *The Forgotten Gods of Tibet*, 1997: 98-99.

7   Khosla, R. 1979. *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalaya*. Kahmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

8   Vitali, R. 1996. *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.hrang*, Dharamsala: Tho.ling gtsug.lag.khang lo.gcig stong 'khor.ba'i rjes.dran.mdzad sgo'i go. sgrig tshogs.chung, fn. 896, p.525, inscription beneath Tsong kha pa: *rje btsun chos kyi rgyal po thams cad mkhyen pa blo bzang (grags pa)*.

9   Lha dbang blo gros is known to have flourished in the mid-15th century. These dates for his lifetime are given by Francke, *op.cit.* p.35, while Vitali (*ibid.* p.527) states that Lha dbang blo gros was active in Ladakh, Kinnaur and Spiti during the period 1461-1474.

10   Vitali, *op.cit.* fn. 896, p.525, inscription beneath Lha dbang blo gros: *gro ba rnams kyi rgyal po gtsug gi rgyan du gyur...[three letters defaced] ...rje lha dbang tshan (sic mtshan) can la*", " The one bearing the name rje lha dbang, ...who became the ornament of the crown, the lord of sentient beings".

11   Vitali, *ibid.*, reads: *ta po rgyan gyi gtsug lag khang bkod pa*, "He (Lha dbang blo gros) founded the *gtsug lag khang* ornament of Ta po" (Ta po is called Cog la rgyan, i.e. "ornament of Cog la" in the *Mnga' ris rgyal rabs* p.54 lines 9-10). Yannick Laurent, comparing the readings by Tucci and Vitali, considered Vitali's translation to be in error, notably because the verb "to construct/to found (temples)" is more usually *bzhengs pa*, rather than *bkod pa* (personal communication, April 2016). Also, Luigi Fieni's photograph (2010) of the inscription clearly shows the genitive *gi*, ie. *ta po rgyan gyi gtsug lag khang gi 'kod (sic) pa*, as read by Tucci (*op.cit.* p.112-113). The presence of *gi* implies that *bkod pa* is a noun form, a ground-plan, a depiction of a building; hence the translation *bkod pa* as a verb "to construct" is invalid. Vitali reads the second historic inscription nearby as: *tho gling gser khang gi bkod pa*, "He (Lha dbang

Vitali interpreted the inscriptions to attribute to Lha dbang blo gros both the construction of the Tholing Gser khang and the foundation of temples at Tabo as part of a vast period of Dge lugs pa activity and patronage in mid-15th century Guge[12] (Fig. 2: Inscription on Tabo).[13]

Fig. 1a — Portrait of Lha dbang blo gros, mural painting, h. 120 cm. Tabo dkyil khang,

blo gros) founded Tholing gser khang". Again, the genitive particle *gi* nominalizes the word *bkod pa*. Tucci, *ibid.*, translated: "plan of the Gser khang of Tholing" and "ground plan of the temple, ornament of Tabo", with which we concur. I thank Roberto Vitali and Yannick Laurent for several discussions of this inscription.

[12] Vitali, R. 2012. *The Dge lugs pa in Gu ge and the Western Himalaya (early 15th-late-17th century)*, Dharamsala, Amnye Machen Institute, p. 221-222.

[13] My thanks to Verena Widorn of West Himalayan Archive Vienna for her help and to Christian Jahoda for permission to illustrate his photograph taken in 2000.

photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

Fig. 1b — Portion of North wall murals with portrait of Lha dbang blo gros, Tabo dkyil khang,
photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

Fig. 2 — Historic Inscriptions about Tabo and Tholing, mural painting, Tabo *dkyil khang,*

In 1999, Petech analysed differently the same inscriptions in the *dkyil khang*; he proposed to credit Lha dbang blo gros with "renovations (?) at Tholing" (*tho gling gser khang gi dkod pa*) rather than the foundation of the *gser khang* as per Vitali.[14]

In 1997, Deborah Klimburg-Salter's succinct description of the *dkyil khang* roughly coincided with the remarks by Tucci. She evoked the main iconographic context of this chapel and ventured a historical perspective for the function of the *dkyil khang*:[15]

> "On functional grounds, the small *maṇḍala* temple may also be considered a product of a relatively early period. It was not unusual to have a smaller *Maṇḍala* temple near the larger Assembly Hall. The former was used for tantric initiations and teachings, one example is the *gsum brtsegs* in Alchi. Today there are 3 large *maṇḍala*s in a very ruined condition. The main *maṇḍala* is again dedicated to Vairocana but the textual source is different from the *maṇḍala* in the main temple. There are also extremely important historical paintings where many scenes and persons are identified, often badly misspelt and poorly preserved."

In subsequent research, Laxman Thakur (2001) emphasized the importance of the paintings of the Tabo temple structures in the *dkyil khang*, considering them to be "extremely important for establishing a reliable chronology of temples in the complex".[16] He attributed the construction of the Tabo *gser khang* to ca. 1450 and *dkyil khang* slightly later during the 15th century under the aegis of Lha dbang blo gros. For Thakur, because the *gser khang* temple is painted under Lha dbang blo gros and named (by inscription), it shows that the *gser khang* existed when the mural of the *dkyil khang* was painted. Thakur concurred with Tucci in regard to the portraits of the royal monks of the Guge family; he also described a "totally mutilated" 8-line inscription beneath the three monks[17] (see Fig. 3 Tucci archive,

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[14] Petech, L. Historical Introduction. *In* L. Petech and C. Luczanits (eds.), *Inscriptions from the Tabo Main Temple, Text and Translation*. Roma: IsIAO, p. 6.

[15] Klimburg-Salter, *op.cit.*, p.66.

[16] Thakur, L. 2001. *Buddhism in the Western Himalaya. A Study of the Tabo Monastery.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.83.

[17] Thakur, L. *ibid*, p.85.

the 3 royal monks).[18]

Fig. 3 — Portraits of the Three lamas: Byang chub 'od, Zhi ba 'od, Lha bla ma Ye shes 'od, mural painting, Tabo dkyil khang (MNAO photographic archive, Giuseppe Tucci's collection, N. 6024-17, photography by Eugenio Ghersi, 1933; courtesy National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome).

Thakur also concurred with Tucci's analysis of a Vairocana mural at centre, a *maṇḍala* of Akṣobhya on the north wall; on the south wall, Thakur identified a *maṇḍala* centred on Śākyamuni for the south wall. He concluded his remarks by stating that the problem of dating the *dkyil khang* remains unsolved, however due to his observations of aesthetic similarities of the Tabo *gser khang* and the *dkyil khang*, he proposed a date of late 15th for construction of the temple and its paintings.[19]

In 2013, the Tibetan historian Rahula, former resident at Tabo, published a detailed history of the monastery from the 10th to 20th century in which he studied the iconography of the murals, the Tibetan historic inscriptions, and the chronology of the *dkyil khang*.[20]

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[18] I am tremendously indebted to Oscar Nalesini of the Tucci photographic archive for his efforts to clarify the original photographs and kind authorization to publish.

[19] Thakur, L. *ibid*, p.86.

[20] Ra hu la. 2013. *Ta po. dus rabs bcu pa nas nyi shu pa'i bar gyi snga mo'i rgya gar dans bod kyi ldebs ris dang yi ge nub hi ma' la ya'i gna' bo'i dgon grong zhig. An Ancient Western Himalayan Repository of age old Indian and Tibetan mural*

His reading of the historic inscriptions concurs with the readings by Tucci. Similar to the analysis of Klimburg-Salter, he considered that the *dkyil khang* was in all likelihood constructed roughly the same time as the *gtsug lag khang*, but restored many, many times, which situation also applied to the Maitreya temple and the small *'brom ston* temple. Rahula identified the mural of the three royal monks as part of the original iconographic program, along with the murals for Akṣobhya on the south, Vairocana at centre, and another aspect of Akṣobhya on the north wall, with the 15th century additions of the large monk portraits.[21] Likewise, Peter van Ham (2014) stated that the *dkyil khang* was presumably part of the original layout of the monastery complex or added slightly later, assessing the Dge lugs pa monk portraits to be later additions of 16th to 17th century.[22] In addition to the central wall's Sarvavid Vairocana mural, on the north wall, he identified a *maṇḍala* from the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* cycle with Mahavairocana as Śakyasiṃha in the centre of the *maṇḍala*.[23]

This review of the previous research allows an appreciation of the different identifications in terms of iconographic program for the temple and the contradictory interpretations of the Tibetan inscriptions. When requested to fully document the state of the paintings in 2010 it was possible to photograph all the walls and inscriptions despite the damaged condition. Thanks in part to technological advances in photography, and some conservation work in intervening years under the auspices of the Archaeological Survey of India, underpainting is now evident in some cases. Several distinct and not necessarily successive phases of restoration over the centuries are apparent in the juxtaposition of certain sections within the same *maṇḍala*. The inscriptions remain problematic to read and

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paintings and scripts dating from the tenth to the twentieth century. Tabo: Library of Tabo monastery, p.476: " *lha khang 'di dpal ldan bkra shis bde legs gtsug lag khang dang dus mnyam du bzhengs par ngos 'dzin* ...." This temple and the glorious auspicious *gtsug lag khang* are clearly constructed at the same time..."

[21] Rahula, *ibid.*, p.476-477: On the south, Akṣobhya (*mi 'khrugs pa*) with the later addition of scenes from the biography of Tsong kha pa, at centre Vairocana (*kun rig*, Sarvavid Vairocana) and on the north, Akṣobhya (*bcom ldan mi bskyod pa*), with the later addition of the portrait of Lha dbang blo gros and the buildings of Tabo and Tholing.

[22] van Ham, P.2014. *Tabo - Gods of Light. The Indo-Tibetan Masterpiece.* Munich: Hirmer Verlag, p.292.

[23] van Ham, *ibid.*, p.292.

interpret due to their fragmentary nature. Further infra-red photography of additional panels of inscriptions may yield additional data and insights. Yet, already, let us now consider evidence gleaned from the new photographic documentation of 2010 and from research on iconographic parallels in murals and *maṇḍala*s in the ancient temples of Guge and cave temples of Ladakh.

The iconographic program of the dkyil khang

1. Maṇḍala of Sarvavid Vairocana, west wall, centre

When Tucci observed the mural representing the Sarvavid Vairocana he correctly observed that the cycle was not the same as the statues of the *gtsug lag khang*. He was misled, however, by a series of six figures at the top that, "[does] not seem to have any connection with the *maṇḍala* itself, as they are there to represent different Buddha in ascetic robes".[24] This confused his assessment of the whole wall. The subsequent cleaning of the murals has removed soot near the ceiling; consequently, all across the entire temple similar seated Buddha in monastic garments are now visible. The multitude of this assembly, their body proportions, shading, and drapery of the cowl neck robes with flowing pleats, strongly recall the assembly of Buddha of the Bhadrakalpa painted in the exterior wall of the cella in the *gtsug lag khang*. (Fig. 4 Bhadrakalpa Buddha of the cella and Fig. 5 detail of *dkyil khang* Bhadrakalpa Buddha).

The Buddha of the cella are identical in respect to their *mudrā* but vary in the colour of their bodies and their robes; the Bhadrakalpa Buddha in the *dkyil khang* vary in their *mudrā* as well. In the late 11th century murals at Phyi dbang, the Bhadrakalpa Buddha are very similar in robes, body proportions and *mudrā* to those of the Tabo *dkyil khang* (Fig. 6: Bhadrakalpa Buddha of Phyi dbang).[25]

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[24] Tucci, *o p.cit.*, p.110.
[25] Neumann, H. and Neumann, H. 2014. Wall paintings of the Dungkar Caves Three and Four: Iconography and Style. *Orientations* 45 (5), figs. 4 and 25.

Fig. 4 — Detail of Tabo gtsug lag khang cella ambulatory Bhadrakalpa Buddha, mural
painting, photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

Fig. 5 — Detail of Tabo dkyil khang Bhadrakalpa Buddha assembly and preta segment outer
ring Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni maṇḍala mural painting, photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

Fig. 6 — Detail of Phyi dbang Bhadrakalpa Buddha assembly, photography by Helmut and Heidi Neumann, 1997.

Due to underpainting of similar Buddha figures which remained visible in the lower edge of the cella wall of Tabo, attributed to the 996 C.E. foundation, the series of Buddha of the Bhadrakalpa as now represented have been attributed to the renovation phase, of 1041-42 C.E. and the second half of the 11th century.[26] The 1933 photograph of the central section of the *dkyil khang* Sarvavid Vairocana mural did not allow Tucci to understand that in fact, Sarvavid Vairocana was seated in the midst of a cross-arrangement, horizontal and vertical intersection with the four Tathāgatas as well as 16 Bodhisattvas surrounding Vairocana as may be observed in the modern photograph (Fig. 7. Tucci archive photo and Fig. 8. 2010 photo of Vairocana).

In terms of the configuration of this Vairocana *maṇḍala*, it is a very similar arrangement to the *Dharmadhātu Vāgiśvara maṇḍala* on the upper portion of the *gtsug lag khang*.[27] In Tabo where the memory of Rin chen bzang po is so present, it is pertinent to recall that Rin chen bzang po and Śraddhākaravarman were the translators of the

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[26] Klimburg-Salter, op.cit., p.46 and Fig.15 discuss the original layer of painting and the subsequent renovation phase.
[27] Klimburg-Salter, *ibid.*, p.127 Diagram 10, and Fig.113.

Dharmadhātu Vāgiśvara maṇḍala cycle (Peking no. 3416).[28]

As for the identification of this *maṇḍala* of Sarvavid Vairocana, it is surely related to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*, 'The Elimination of all Evil Destinies', where the earliest description of Vairocana designates him as Sarvavid (*kun rig*), the Omniscient aspect of Vairocana, white in body colour, with four faces, and the mudrā of meditative concentration (*ting nge 'dzin phyag rgya*) as he is represented here.[29] This aspect of Vairocana is to be differentiated from the Sarvavid Vairocana in the principal *maṇḍala* of Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha, where the central figure is also named Sarvavid Vairocana, also white with four faces, but his hands perform the bodhiyagri *mudrā*, (*byang chub sems kyi phyag rgya*), where the index finger of the right hand is clasped by the left hand, closed in a fist.[30] In the *dkyil khang*, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely which *maṇḍala* is depicted due to the state of conservation which renders the subsidiary figures difficult to discern. Vairocana in this aspect is sovereign of a *maṇḍala* which was often represented in eleventh-century monasteries in western Tibet, because the great monk Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) translated and performed rituals belonging to this liturgical cycle.[31]

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[28] I thank Professor Mori Masahide for the information that though there is no translator mentioned in its colophon, the Tibetan index attached to the Peking edition clarifies that the translators were Śraddhākaravarman and Rin chen bzang po, as per *A Comparative Analytical Catalogue of the Tanjur Division of the Tibetan Tripitaka I. 3*, Otani University, 1977. (Personal communication 27.09.2007).

[29] Skorupski, T. 1983. *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra, Elimination of All Evil Destinies*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

[30] For discussion of several different Vairocana liturgies in Guge during the 11th century; see Heller, A. 2010. Preliminary remarks on the donor inscriptions and iconography of an 11th-century *mchod rten* at Tholing. *In* E. Lo Bue and C. Luczanits (eds.), *Tibetan Art and Architecture in Context (Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the IATS, Königswinter 2006)*. Halle, Saale: International Institute for Tibetan Studies, 43–74.

[31] Skorupski, T. *ibid.*, p.xvii. The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana maṇḍala* was so significant for Rin chen bzang po that he performed it for the funerary ceremonies for his father (see Heller, A. *ibid.*, p.67-69).

Fig. 7— Vairocana, mural painting, Tabo dkyil khang (MNAO photographic archive, Giuseppe Tucci's collection, N.6024-13, photography by Eugenio Ghersi, 1933; courtesy National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome).

Fig. 8 — Vairocana maṇḍala, mural painting, Tabo dkyil khang photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

2. *Maṇḍala of Akṣobhya, left wall, north wall*

Tucci formulated the hypothesis of a *maṇḍala* devoted to Akṣobhya and recognized the characteristic circular configuration (Fig. 9 Tucci archive photo of Akṣobhya): "On the left wall... we have a real *maṇḍala* with its 'mura', its doors, its arches (*torana*) and its 'custodians' set up to defend the four doors. The arrangement of the deities symbolized is on a cross formation, that is the deity from which the *maṇḍala* takes its name, is in the centre and the others are arranged in the direction of the four cardinal points and of the intermediate points. The identification of the *maṇḍala* offers serious difficulties, in view of the very poor state of preservation of the fresco. But the central painting represents a deity with the right hand in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*; this would enable us to suppose that the deity represented is Akṣobhya".[32]

The specific configuration of the centre of this *maṇḍala* represents the white Buddha Akṣobhya, wearing a dhoti and scarves, his *uṣṇīṣa* very prominent, seated on a lotus supported by two elephants, his requisite vehicle (Fig. 10 2010 photo of Akṣobhya).

He is inside a circle divided into 9 compartments in a horizontal-vertical alignment. Akṣobhya is at the central compartment surrounded by the four Tathāgatas at the four cardinal points and four of the eight goddesses of offering in the intermediary sectors. The additional four goddesses are in the far corners of the *maṇḍala*, while the 16 Bodhisattvas are aligned inside the square. The precise textual basis for the *dkyil khang maṇḍala* remains to be determined. It may possibly be related to rituals composed by Atīśa, the renowned Indian *paṇḍita* who, at royal behest, taught and translated in the Guge kingdom from 1042-1045. A 9-deity Akṣobhya *maṇḍala* was composed by Atīśa, then translated by himself and Rin chen bzang po, as part of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* rituals. This ritual describes the Buddha Akṣobhya seated inside a lotus circle with 8 petals, on which are seated the 8 goddesses of offering.[33] In this

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[32] Tucci, G. *op.cit.*, p.111.

[33] Bsod nams rgya mtsho. 1991. *The Ngor Maṇḍalas of Tibet, Listing of the Maṇḍala deities*. Tokyo: The Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, p.18. 9-deity Akṣobhya *maṇḍala* transmitted by Atīśa. *Jo bo rje 'i lugs mi 'khrugs pa lha dgu'i dkyil 'khor* (Toh. 743). In the canonical version of this ritual, it is specified that the Buddha is blue and in *saṃbhogakāya* aspect. This is an indication that the *maṇḍala* has been re-interpreted over the centuries. In the ritual text composed by

ritual, neither the body colour nor the garments of Akṣobhya are specified.[34] In a second ritual by Atīśa, similar to the *dkyil khang* example, Akṣobhya is seated on a lotus, his right hand in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* and he is surrounded by the four Tathāgatas, however in this text his body colour is blue.

Fig. 9 — Akṣobhya maṇḍala, mural painting Tabo dkyil khang (MNAO photographic archive, Giuseppe Tucci's collection, N -6024-15, photography by Eugenio Ghersi, 1933; courtesy National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome).

Atīśa, the body colour is not given. The colophon concludes with the statement that this ritual is part of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* rituals and it was translated by Atīśa himself and Rin chen bzang po (*'di bris pa yi dge ba yis/ ngan song rnam sbyang thar lam sgrub/ kun gyis bzang po mthong bar shog/ slob dpon mar me mdzad kyis mdzad pa'i dkyil 'khor gi cho ga rdzogs so// Paṇḍita de nyid dang lo tsa ba rin chen bzang pos bsgyur ba'o//*.

[34] See Himalayan Art Resource, http://www.himalayanart.org/items/296 for a 16th century *thangka* of this *maṇḍala*, where Akṣobhya's body is light blue in colour however this is not specified in Atīśa ritual text for this *maṇḍala*.

Fig. 10 — Akṣobhya maṇḍala, mural painting,Tabo dkyil khang , photography by Luigi Fieni, 2010.

The representation of Akṣobhya in the Tabo *maṇḍala* is distinctive insofar as his body colour is white, he is represented in Indian royal garments, his right hand in *bhumisparśa mudrā*, and he is seated on lotus pedestal supported by two large elephants. In the context of the Five Tathāgatas, usually Akṣobhya is blue in colour, but in the depiction of Akṣobhya in his paradise as described in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*, he is white. [35] The elephant *vāhana* is exclusively his, thus the identification of Akṣobhya is certain. In the context of the iconographic program of the whole chapel, where the Sarvavid Vairocana is derived from the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana,* the white body colour of Akṣobhya in this *maṇḍala* may perhaps indicate that this *sādhana* of Akṣobhya was also related to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana.*[36]

3. The 37-deity Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni maṇḍala from the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana cycle, right wall, south wall

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[35] Skorupski, T. *o p.cit.*, p.45, n.28 for a white Akṣobhya. See discussion by Goepper, R. 1999. Akshobhya and His Paradise: Murals in the Dukhang of Alchi. *Orientations* 30 (1), 16–21.

[36] For discussion of the *maṇḍalas* of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* cycle, see Fickle, Dorothy H. 1994. The Bodhisattva with a Mask. *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 54, No. 3/4, p p.347-375.

Although Tucci considered the *maṇḍala* on the south wall to be indecipherable, he did publish a photograph of the centre of the *maṇḍala* (Fig.11 Tucci archive photo Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni).

Fig. 11 — NavoṣṇīṣaŚ ākyamuni maṇḍala, mural painting (MNAO photographic archive, Giuseppe Tucci's collection, N - 6024-14, photography by Eugenio Ghersi, 1933; courtesy National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome.

This allowed a certainty that the focus of the *maṇḍala* was a Buddha performing the *dharmacakra* gesture, wearing monastic garments, seated on a lotus, inside a distinctive ring with small circles, each with an auspicious symbol, then 8 deities in a second ring surrounding the central Buddha. This very distinctive configuration is also linked to a *maṇḍala* of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*. In the canonical version of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*, this *maṇḍala* is known as the 37 deity Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala*.[37] Although at present it remains

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[37] Skorupski, T. *op.cit.*, p p.22 -25 *passim* describes the group of Śākyamuni/ Śākyasiṃha and the 8 Uṣṇīṣa deities.

difficult to see well, the central Buddha has traces of gold on his body. (Fig. 11a 1994 centre of Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala* and Fig. 12 Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala*).[38]

Fig. 11a — Center of Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni maṇḍala Tabo dkyil khang, mural painting, photograph by Peter van Ham 1994.

Fig. 12 — Deity Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni maṇḍala Tabo dkyil khang, mural painting, photograph by Peter van Ham 1994.

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[38] I thank Peter van Ham for his photographs.

This gold-colour Buddha is to be identified as Śākyasiṃha, closely related in appearance to the teaching Buddha Śākyamuni; in this aspect he is an emanation of the Buddha Vairocana in one of the principal rituals of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*. The eight figures surrounding him are the Eight Uṣṇīṣa deities, representative of the virtues and actions of the Buddha, thus the Sanskrit name is Navoṣṇīṣa,[39] which refers to the central Buddha and the group of eight, all with the *uṣṇīṣa* indicative of their supernatural qualities.[40]

In the Guge kingdom, this *maṇḍala* is also found as a ceiling *maṇḍala* in Dungkar, cave 3,[41] in proximity to the residence of two sovereigns of the Guge royal family in the late 11th century.[42] In the Dungkar cave, beside the circular *maṇḍala* on the ceiling, there is a representation of the *Dharmadhātu Vāgiśvara maṇḍala* in very similar arrangement to horizontal and vertical configuration of the Sarvavid Vairocana *maṇḍala* on the centre wall of the *dkyil khang*. In Ladakh, the earliest representation of this *maṇḍala* is found as a wall *maṇḍala* in a cave temple near the monastery of Spithuk, originally founded by 'Od lde (r. 1024–1037), a scion of the royal family of Guge. We must also take note of close religious patronage which increasingly linked the royal lineage of Guge and Ladakh during the second half of the 11th century.[43] Although quite damaged, it is clearly the same configuration as the south wall *maṇḍala* of *dkyil khang* of Tabo.[44] The 37-deity Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala* is also represented in the Alchi Dukhang on the north wall, in a slight variant that the southernmost petal of the 8 symbols instead has a small figure of Prajñapāramitā in a six-arm aspect (Fig. 13 Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni Alchi Dukhang).[45]

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[39] *nāva* is Sanskrit for nine, which combined with *uṣṇīṣa* produces the term *navoṣṇīṣa*, 9 *uṣṇīṣa* deities.

[40] Tohoku 485. Bsod nams rgya mtsho 1991, *op. cit. maṇḍala* 39, p p.72-73.

[41] Neumann, H. and Neumann, H. 2014. Wall paintings of the Dungkar Caves Three and Four: Iconography and Style. *Orientations* 45 (5), 63-67.

[42] Vitali, R. 1996. *op.cit.*, 126-127.

[43] Vitali 1996, *op.cit.*, 301, n. 466 for phases of temple foundations in Ladakh during the 11th century.

[44] van Ham, P. Ladakh's Missing Link? The Murals of Tragkhung Kowache. *Orientations* 45 (5), 50-57. I thank Peter van Ham for discussion of this iconography and his help for photographs. Van Ham's study was the first research to propose the identification of Tabo *dkyil khang's* Śākyamuni *maṇḍala* as stemming from the cycle of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*.

[45] Lionel Fournier photographed the Alchi temple complex in 1978. The initial results of his research were published in 1982 by Pratapaditya Pal, however

Fig. 13 — Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni maṇḍala, Alchi Dukhang, mural painting, photograph by Lionel Fournier, 1978.

Close examination of Tucci's original photograph of the Tabo Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala* shows that the lowest petal is also distinctive in its content in regard to the other petals and may in fact correspond to the version of the iconography in the Alchi Dukhang's Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni *maṇḍala*.

Conclusion

The present research has concentrated on the *dkyil khang* of Tabo, a temple which has been an enigmatic element within the monastic complex, both for its chronology and for its iconographic program. Past research has well established that the main sanctuary of the Tabo *gtsug lag khang* was the most ancient construction founded in 996 C.E. The renovation of the *gtsug lag khang* ca. 1041-2, under the aegis of the kings of Guge, occurred during a phase of great activity in religious fervour in the Guge Kingdom, which persisted throughout the second half of the 11th century. It is in this period which has been situated the construction of the Maitreya Temple

(*byams khang*), and the small *'brom ston lha khang*.

Simultaneously in Tholing, under the King Rtse lde and with the presence of royal monk-translator Zhi ba 'od, there were great activities of translations of Buddhist texts and teachings, as well as temple construction, embellishment and creation of manuscripts leading to the 1076 Great Buddhist Council, bringing together *paṇḍitas*, translators and artists of several lands. It behooves us not to neglect the potential significance of the three royal portraits in the *dkyil khang,* including Zhi ba 'od, which may portend involvement or patronage of the Guge royal lineage in the *dkyil khang* itself at this time. Subsequently, after the assassination of Rtse lde in 1083, the capital of the kingdom moved to Dungkhar, where we find the last evidence of the *maṇḍala* in horizontal-vertical alignment in cave temples and already the circular *maṇḍala* of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* 37-deity Navoṣṇīṣa Śākyamuni, as also represented in the *dkyil khang* of Tabo.

In the light of the close relations linking Tabo and Tholing during this period, as well as what has been termed a period of "Guge paramountcy in Ladakh",[46] we have examined the contemporaneous iconography of mid to late 11th century with *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana maṇḍala* parallels in cave temples of Guge and Ladakh as well Alchi monastery. These findings, in comparison to the construction materials, architectural proportions and techniques of construction of the Maitreya temple and the small *'brom ston* temple, which correspond to those of the *dkyil khang*, and in consideration of the new research presented here on the interpretation of the historic inscriptions, the context of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* iconographic program for the *dkyil khang*, may be considered salient elements for the dating of the Tabo *dkyil khang*. In the Tabo *dkyil khang*, pending further confirmation by future infra-red photography of additional inscriptions and sections of the murals, we formulate the hypothesis that the *Maṇḍala* hall *dkyil khang* may also be considered as an ancient construction dating from the second half of the 11th century, roughly contemporary with the Maitreya and small *'brom ston* temples, all three structures of which were embellished with mural paintings in successive phases prior to the Dge lugs pa revival of the mid-15th century, at which time the Tabo *dkyil khang* was partially renovated thanks to Dge lugs pa

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[46]   Petech, L. 1977. *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, Roma: IsIAO, p.18.

patronage.[47]

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[47] For the architectural chronology of the temples at Tabo, I am gratefully indebted to Carmen Auer and Holger Neuwirth. See the recent study by H. Neuwirth and C. Auer
(http://www.archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Tabo/3D/tabo_stage2.html
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