THE MONASTERY COMPLEX

The monastery complex consists of several buildings which are dramatically located on a steep rocky cliff. The multi-tiered building with its labyrinth of rooms developed over centuries forming the heart of the fortress monastery of Dangkhar. Directly above the main building a tower leans against the rock. It was once used to reach the Upper Temple which overlooks the whole valley. At the foothills of the monastery, an ancient stupa gateway was lately modified, granted access to the area. It still bears some skilfully carved leonine wooden capitals.

THE RESTORATION PROJECT

In 2006, the ancient monastery of Dangkhar was recognised by the World Monument Fund as one of the most endangered sites in the world. Since 2010, a team of international experts in the field of Architecture, Archaeology, Art History and Conservation, and Geology is committed to the entire documentation and restoration of this exceptional monument.

In addition, the Restoration Project also aims at creating a better understanding of the unique cultural heritage of the Spiti valley by setting up a museum and by promoting Spitian studies worldwide.

The completion of this project is entirely supported by private funding. If you wish to join in, donate or receive our annual newsletter please ask a representative of Dangkhar Tashi Cho Ling or use the following contact information.

Dangkhar Restoration Project
Markus Weisskopf
www.markusweisskopf.com

Graz University of Technology
Faculty of Architecture
Institute of Architectural Theory, Art History and Cultural Studies
Technikerstraße 4/3
A- 8010 Graz / AUSTRIA
www.savedangkhar.tugraz.at

Dangkhar Tashi Cho Ling Monastery
P.O. Drang Khar, Teh. Kaza - 172113
Distt. Lahaul Spiti
Himachal Pradesh / INDIA
Phone: +91(0)1906272257

Three dimensional models and ground plans of Dangkhar, Graz University of Technology 2011
HISTORICAL SETTING

The ancient monastery of Dangkhar (Tib. Brag mkhar), situated in the village of the same name, is perched on a vertiginous cliff at the impressive altitude of 3,850 m overlooking the meanders of the Spiti-Pin river confluence. The origin of this fortified site is believed to go back to the 10th -11th century when a powerful dynasty of royal patrons and kings initiated a Buddhist Renaissance in the Western Himalayas. It gradually assumed the double function of a political centre and a religious establishment and witnessed the various influences from the neighbouring states (e.g. Ladakh, Tibet) which competed for political supremacy and religious hegemony. Despite the lack of historical sources and archaeological evidence available, the monastery of Dangkhar is intimately linked to the history of the Spiti valley which was an important centre for trade, communication and religious ideas between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and West Tibet as some of the paintings in the Upper Temple can still attest.

The history of Buddhism in Spiti can be divided into several periods of religious influence. The murals of the Assembly Hall and the wall paintings of the Upper Temple still depict the vibrant portraits of some of the most revered religious teachers of the Kadampa, Kagyupa and Gelugpa schools of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. In 1654, a monk from Dangkhar went to Central Tibet to complete his religious education and eventually became the 40th holder of the Ganden Throne, the most prestigious and powerful rank in the Gelugpa hierarchy after the Dalai Lamas. In the 17th - 18th century, the kingdom of Ladakh occupied the region for brief periods. It is probably during those years that a garrison post was built on top of the spur overlooking the village and monastery of Dangkhar. It eventually became the seat of the Nono, a castellan of noble origin, who was soon identified as the upholder of the law as many documents still attest. In the 19th century, the Spiti valley was invaded by the Sikh militia. The fortress monastery of Dangkhar was besieged and plundered on various occasions but the tenacity of the inhabitants of this spectacular location always succeeded in defeating their enemies as they like recalling. After 1846, the British ruled the area and the lands of Spiti, Lahul, and Ladakh were delivered into the hands of the government of India at last.

MAIN MONASTERY BUILDING

From the new monastery of Tashi Cho Ling a road goes around the village of Dangkhar leading to the main entrance of the ancient site. Next to the entrance a rural museum shows local objects of Spiti as well as some fine Buddhist works. In front of the main façade an artificial terrace opens up to a nearly vertical precipice. On the left, a crumbling kitchen still defies the laws of gravity. A circumambulation path used to run along the eastern façade but is now interrupted due to the erosion of the cliff. A few steps lead inside the building and give access to a labyrinth of empty rooms, chapels, caves and monk quarters. On the first floor the Assembly Hall (Tib. ‘du khang) opens on the right (1). This large room, where monks gather for religious ceremonies, accommodates a bookcase which contains the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. Three clay statues of Tsongkhapa, Śākyamuni, and Maitreya stand in the centre of the altar. Although the murals of the Assembly Hall need immediate attention, two beautiful depictions of Buddha Amitabha and Green Tara can be admired on the right hand corner of the room. A central skylight once allowed light to filter through. Going up the stairs, the entry of the Lower Protector’s Chapel (Tib. mgon khang) is strictly restricted to the monks of Dangkhar (2). The main curvature of the second floor is an atypical space which accommodates a series of four stupas (Tib. mchod rten) in the back (3). The largest of them, which disappears inside the ceiling, could be the reliquary of some important person linked to the history of the place. A last flight of stairs reaches the third floor where several rooms are organised around a central courtyard. In the left hand corner of the courtyard a narrow passage leads to a rock-cut meditation cave (4). In the past, other caves were inhabited by hermits and monks on the south-western side of the building. The next room is the residence of H.H. Dalai-Lama (6). A vestibule (5), covered with Vinaya related wall-paintings, gives access to the audience room dominated by a statue of Maitreya. Two more rooms are located in the south-eastern corner of the courtyard. The Upper Protector’s Chapel (Tib. mgon khang), where the monks propagate the tutelary deities of the monastery daily, is usually restricted to a few individuals (7). Nevertheless it is possible to peep into that room from the threshold. Finally, the residence of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (Tib. lo chen rin po che’i gzims chung) displays a remarkable collection of scroll-painting thangkas as well as some of the masks used during the annual monastic dances (8).

The roof of the main building can be reached through a steep wooden ladder. The roof is ornaed with victory banners (Tib. rgyal mtnshan) symbolising the subjugation of evil forces by Buddhism. A three storey tower used to provide access to the top of the rock. It is locked due to the dodgy condition of its stairs and wooden structures. Hence it is now required to leave the main building in order to reach the Upper Temple. A dusty track, which goes up to the old village, eventually joins a flight of concrete stairs leading to the uppermost part of the monastery complex.

Southern corner of the monastery building

The Upper Temple (Tib. lha khang gong ma) is undoubtedly the jewel of Dangkhar monastery. Despite the ungraceful restoration of some of its paintings made years ago, a wide range of Buddhist themes and local scenes will ravish the eyes of the visitors and pilgrims alike. A lower frieze running on the left and right walls depicts twelve scenes of the life of the historical Buddha (Tib. mdzad pa bcu gnyis). The frieze on the central wall shows the Spitian court of those years at a royal banquet. A group of envoys on horses are welcomed by musicians and dancing girls. The whole scene is influenced by both regional and Central Asian aesthetic. The main wall is devoted to the uninterrupted lineage of Buddhist masters from the Buddha Śākyamuni, in the centre, to the Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), on the left side, via the Indian pandit Atiśa (982-1054) on the right side.

Other Indo-Tibetan masters of the Kagyupa school are depicted on the right side of the upper right wall. Among them the indian mahasiddha Tilopa and Naropa, and the famous yogi Milarepa (1040-1123) with his long black hair, white cotton cloth, and red meditational stripe.

The lake of Dangkhar (4,150 m) abode of a water deity

A beautiful bronze of Avalokiteśvara - rural museum

Dancing Spitian girls and envoys - detail of the wall painting in the Upper Temple