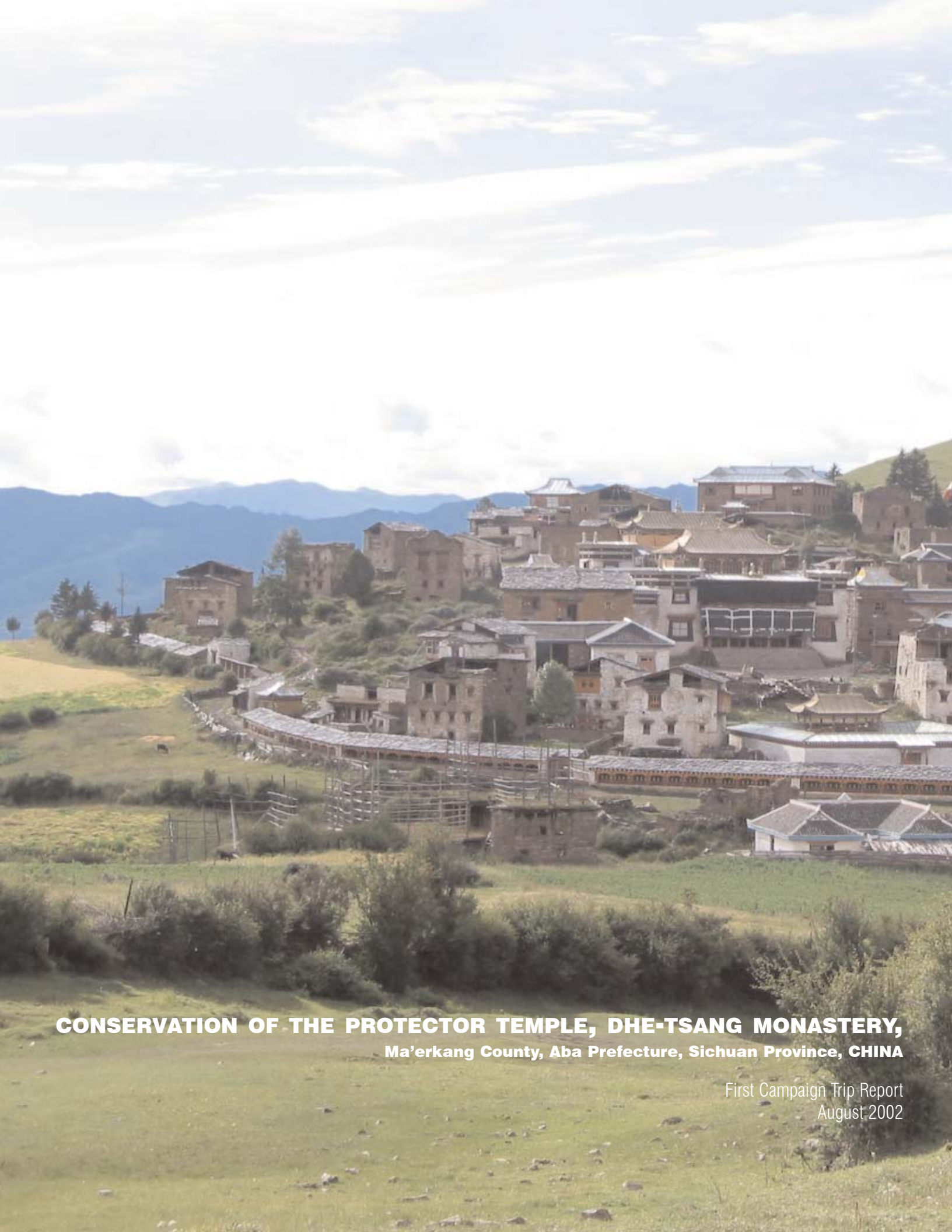


CONSERVATION OF THE PROTECTOR TEMPLE, DHE-TSANG MONASTERY,

Ma'erkang County, Aba Prefecture, Sichuan Province, CHINA

First Campaign Trip Report
August 2002

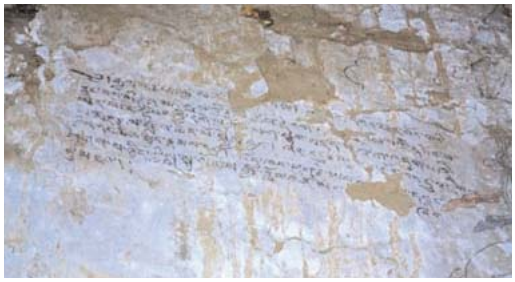
preface

Kham Aid Foundation (KAF) became officially involved with Dhe-Tsang Monastery at the request of one of the monastery's representatives, the Dhe-Tsang Monastery Foundation (DTMF) based in Hong Kong. Necessary structural work on the Protector Temple, the monastery's most sacred building, had resulted in the loss of an original inscription by the 6th Dalai Lama, prompting the DTMF to seek out professional conservation advice before undertaking further potentially destructive work on the structure. Familiar with the work of KAF and its dedication to bettering the lives of Tibetans in Sichuan Province and promoting and preserving their invaluable heritage, the monastery's primary representative and business manager contacted us.

KAF founder and president, Pam Logan, and Art and Architectural Conservation program director, Jonathan Bell, first visited the site with the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in August 2001on a reconnaissance mission to assess the significance of the monastery and the ability of the foundation to provide meaningful assistance. In awe at the artistic and architectural wealth that greeted them both, the KAF representatives quickly recognized the need for proper management and protection of the cultural heritage, both immovable and movable, at the monastery. Upon return from that short visit, Logan and Bell put their efforts into fundraising and planning for a full-fledged campaign that would undertake a complete condition assessment of the Protector Temple and its wall paintings, as well as an inventory and risk assessment of the other buildings and their paintings.

The contents of the present report are the results of investigations carried out during a campaign in August 2002 to Dhe-Tsang monastery with a team of international professional conservators and students, listed below. The campaign and preliminary research and analyses were made possible by grants from the Asian Cultural Council, Rubin Foundation, and Avery Foundation, as well as individual donors. Although the campaign work was interrupted by unforeseen political difficulties, a significant amount of investigative work and condition assessment was completed, as evidenced by this report.

Team Members:
Lori Wong (US), wall painting conservator
Lisa Shekede (Britain), wall painting conservator
Stephanie Bogin* (US/Britain), wall painting conservation student
Rene Fan (Canada/US), architectural conservator
Tenzing Gyaltso* (India/US), architectural conservator
Richard Dollamore (Britain), architectural historian
Joe Davey (Britain/China), environmental conservation assessor
Teresa Heady (US/Britain), ethnographic object conservator
Dolma Tsering (China), wall painting conservation student
Lha-'brug-rgyal (Jerry) (China), wall painting conservation student
Wende Sgomba (Rex) (China), wall painting conservation student
Linda Griffin (Britain/China), interpreter
Wu Bangfu (China), logistical coordinator and interpreter
Vivian Qiu (China), logistical coordinator and interpreter
Jonathan Bell* (US), program director

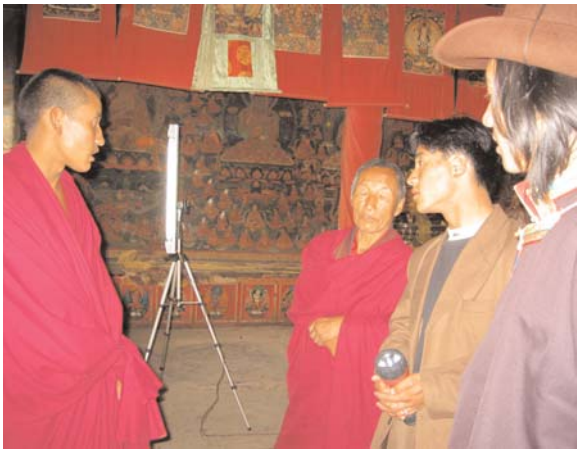


6th Dalai Lama's inscription
A photograph of the inscription believed to have been written on the interior wall of the portico of the Protector Temple before it was lost during structural repairs in 2000.

*Asterisks indicate team members supported specifically by a grant from the Asian Cultural Council.

introduction

This report represents the results of an *in situ* work campaign carried out in August 2002 to investigate the current condition of the structure and wall paintings of the Protector Temple at Dhe-Tsang Monastery, Ma'erkang County, Aba Prefecture, Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China. The team of conservation professionals, sent under the auspices of Kham Aid Foundation at the invitation of the Dhe-Tsang Monastery Foundation, created measured drawings of the Protector Temple, undertook a condition assessment of the structure, and began recording and mapping the various conditions present in the wall paintings. In addition to this work on the Protector Temple, though not to be discussed in this report, the team began documenting other buildings on the site, with particular focus on those structures also housing wall paintings.



Protector Temple / *Main Hall*
KhamAid team members in discussion with monks from Dhe-Tsang
August, 2002

The report briefly presents the history of the site and its significance, followed by the general condition of the building and the preliminary characterization and mapping of conditions of the wall paintings in the main ceremonial hall. A consideration of the surrounding environment and its impact on the Protector Temple follows, with particular focus on drainage and adjacent recent and ongoing construction. The report concludes with a brief discussion of the current management situation at the site and ongoing construction/renovation, which poses the largest threat to the integrity of the Protector Temple, its paintings, and the entire site.

It should be noted here that the concentration of the conservation team on the Protector Temple was a result of the specific request of the Dhe-Tsang Monastery Foundation, speaking on behalf of Khejok Rinpoche, an exiled incarnate spiritual leader of the monastery. Other structures at the lamasery demand more urgent care; questions of proper management, planning and regular maintenance of the site need be addressed in order to ensure the future integrity of the site. However, the specific request by the Rinpoche reflects the unparalleled significance of the Protector Temple and required the team to focus their efforts there before turning to other burning issues. Sadly, as a result of the unclear policy of local officials towards the participation of foreigners in conservation work at Dhe-Tsang Monastery, Kham Aid Foundation has no plans to return to continue the work begun in August 2002. It is hoped that the leaders of Dhe-Tsang Monastery and the local community will secure future assistance in the care and protection of their incredible cultural heritage.

history of the site

Nestled in the hills of the Eastern Tibetan Plateau Dhe-Tsang monastery was founded in 1414 CE according to monastery records. This early date, if corroborated, would make Dhe-Tsang the second oldest Geluk order monastery, as well as one of the oldest extant and presently active monasteries in Aba Prefecture, Sichuan Province.

The details of Dhe-Tsang's history are not well known, in part because the monastery was never an important pilgrimage site, but rather a place devoted to monastic learning. According to legend, the institution was the last of a series of 108 monasteries

Dhe-Tsang Monastery

Historic photograph from 1963

Dhe-Tsang Monastery

Current view of Monastery

August, 2002

established by the founder and, thus, was given its name, meaning "completion". Further investigation is required to determine if Dhe-Tsang's founder did indeed establish any other monasteries during his lifetime.

At its inception, the monastery comprised eight buildings and only a handful of monks. At its peak the monastery encompassed 108 buildings and housed over 800 monks. The architecture, wall painting and history spans almost six hundred years.

Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, the reigning emperor granted a large amount of land to the monastery, attesting to the importance and influence of Dhe-Tsang. Although this land was revoked by his successor only a few years later, the monastery still maintains the road that runs to a town just under an hour away by car.

Today, the monastery is home to only about 50 monks. Yet, it is a repository of numerous examples of centuries-old vernacular architecture and wall paintings executed in a hybrid style similar to the Karma Gadri style of Kham. Today many of the surviving buildings are thought to be at least 150 years old with some of the oldest buildings from the founding of the monastery still surviving. During the initial visit by KhamAid in 2001 no fewer than 17 monks' residences were found adorned with wall painting of various dates in addition to the Protector Temple.

the protector temple

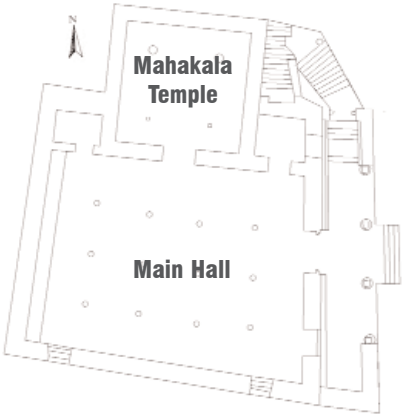
The Protector Temple, dedicated to the fierce protector Gur-gyi mGon-po, is said to be one of the original 8 buildings constructed upon the founding of the monastery in 1414CE. Partly due to its age and partly as a result of its religious role, it is considered the most sacred building in the monastery complex. Though major services are now conducted in the new main prayer hall (completed in 2000), situated directly northeast of the Protector Temple, the Temple is still very much an active religious site, hosting daily prayers and other goings on.

Protector Temple

General view of the Protector Temple showing the east porch. The new prayer hall, completed in 2000, is the building on the right.

August, 2002

Very little is known about the history of the Protector temple. In its recent history the Protector Temple was used as a storage warehouse during the Cultural Revolution. It reopened circa 1983 and has been used as a place of worship up to the present day.

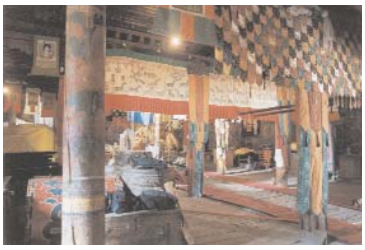


Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Plan

Architectural Team, 2002

The building is constructed of stone with timber frames and lintels and wooden embellishments such as window frames and doorframes. The building is three-stories with an attic-like area housed under the roof. The ground floor is composed of a large ceremonial hall with three rooms situated off the north side, two small side rooms on the northwest and northeast corners and the larger Mahakala Temple situated between the two. A new porch has been added to the east end (finished in 2000).



Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

General view of interior

August, 2002

The roof is made up three separate structures one part sloping south, an overlapping pitched roof facing east-west, and a flat, grass-covered roof covering the new porch. Except for the porch the roofs are constructed of large, overlapping pieces of slate.

building condition

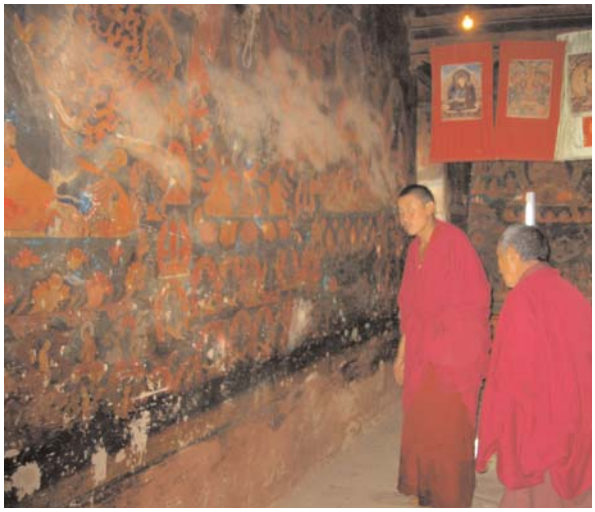
In general, the building appears to be in good condition. The brief condition survey of the Protector Temple included in this report was done in relationship to the condition of the interior wall paintings and is not comprehensive. A separate architectural report is also being produced to highlight the materials, technique, and condition of the structure.

Protector Temple /
Main Hall
General view of exterior
August, 2002

Protector Temple /
Exterior South Wall
Apart from the ground floor there are no panes on any of the windows
August, 2002

paintings

The paintings provide the only known local reference for the development of Buddhist iconography and stylistic expression in this region of Tibet. A list of the major figures depicted in the paintings has been compiled in Tibetan and is currently being translated. This information will provide the basis for an iconographic map of the main chamber.



Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Monks of Dhe-Tsang Monastery inspecting the wall paintings

August, 2002

Condition

Overall the paintings are in stable condition. There are localized areas exhibiting characteristic, moisture-related deterioration however it is not certain whether these areas, most like caused by rainwater infiltration, are still active. This will need to be addressed in the next campaign.

There are large areas of replastering and repainting throughout the main hall. Based on interviews with some of the monks it is thought that the paintings in the Protector Temple were restored in the 1980's.

The following sections (divided by wall) will describe the condition of the wall paintings in the main hall of the Protector Temple in greater detail.

Exterior, East Wall

Protector Temple / *Exterior South Wall*

Detail showing clear delineation of the south wall and new east porch addition

August, 2002

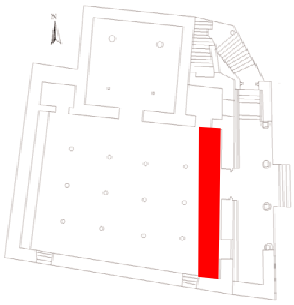
The condition of the east wall is obscured by the addition of the new porch. A clear division exists on the exterior south wall that delineates the main hall from the new porch addition suggesting that a pre-existing structure would have also been built up against the Protector Temple as a separate unit.

Protector Temple / *Exterior East Wall*

View of the east porch completed in 2000

August, 2002

Interior, East Wall



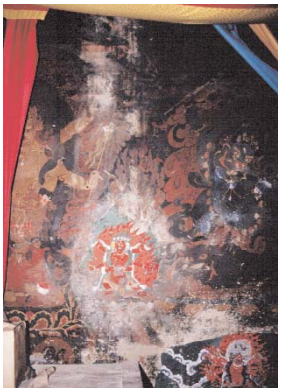
Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Plan indicating location of the interior east wall

The east wall has the bulk of the repainting and replastering carried out during the restoration campaign in the 1980's. Large horizontal bands of repainting exist to the north and south of the entrance door. The northern corner is heavily abraded and as on the eastern corner of the north wall also appears to exhibit two schemes of painting. There are cracks though to be associated with the movement of the wooden ceiling beams below the central and southern beams.

Graphic condition recording of the interior east wall showing general patterns of deterioration

August, 2002



Protector Temple / *Interior East Wall*

Areas of deterioration and repainting on the interior east wall

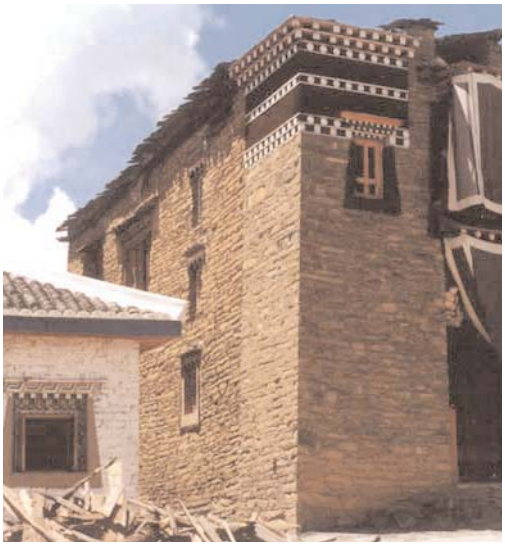
Exterior, South Wall

The exterior south wall exhibits some staining and there are succulents present on the exterior base of the wall. In some places the pointing has also been lost. The windows on the south wall have recently been replaced (to install window panes?) there is new plaster and some of the stones look like they have been replaced.

Protector Temple / *Exterior South Wall*

View of plant growth along the base of wall

August, 2002



Protector Temple / *Exterior South Wall*

General view

August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Exterior South Wall*

View of water staining on upper west corner of the south wall during a heavy rainstorm

August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Interior South Wall*

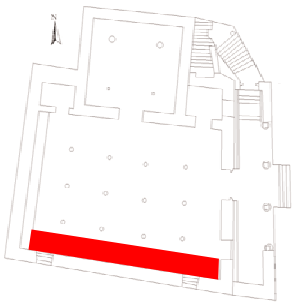
Interior view of above photograph showing water infiltration during a heavy rainstorm

August, 2002

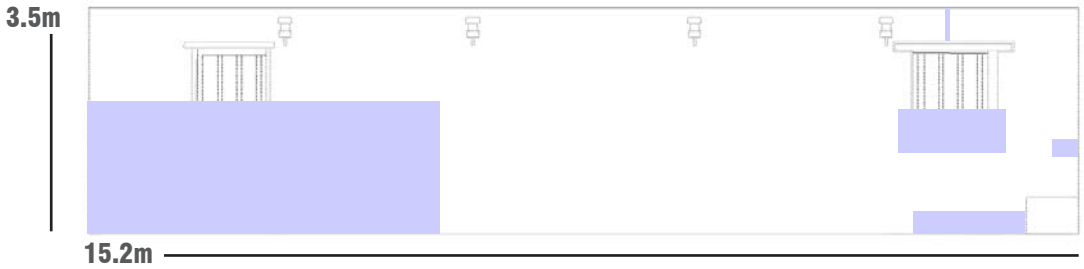
Interior, South Wall

Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Plan indicating location of the interior south wall



The south wall is in fairly good condition apart from the concentration of moisture-related deterioration below the east window. In contrast only a small amount of deterioration is visible below the west window where there is some cracking and small fragments of painted plaster have become loose.



Graphic condition recording of the interior south wall showing general patterns of deterioration

August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Interior South Wall*

General view looking southwest

August, 2002

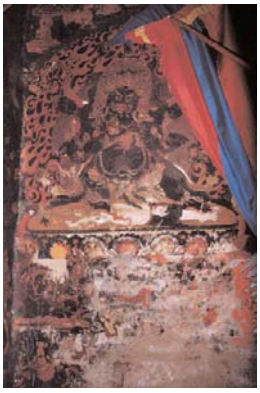
Protector Temple / *Interior South Wall*

Detail of "Map of Lhasa" painting below the western window. August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Interior South Wall*

Detail of moisture-related deterioration below the eastern window. Note areas of repainting

August, 2002



Exterior, West Wall

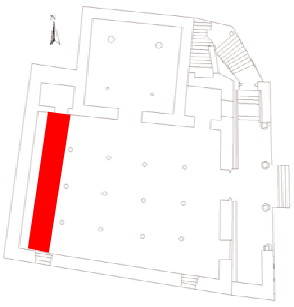
The west wall -- windowless groundfloor -- is in good condition. However, as the slope runs down from north to south water travels along the base of the wall leading to substantial plant growth in this area.

Protector Temple / *Exterior West Wall*
General view
August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Exterior West Wall*
General view, note slope of ground running from north to south
August, 2002

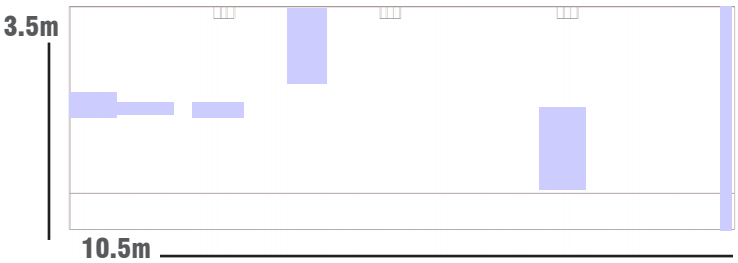
Protector Temple / *Exterior West Wall*
View of base of wall looking north, note plant growth at base of wall
August, 2002

Interior, West Wall

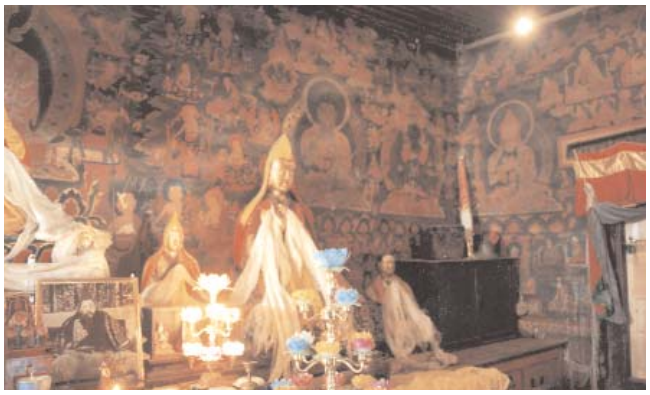


Protector Temple /
Main Hall
Plan indicating location of the interior west wall

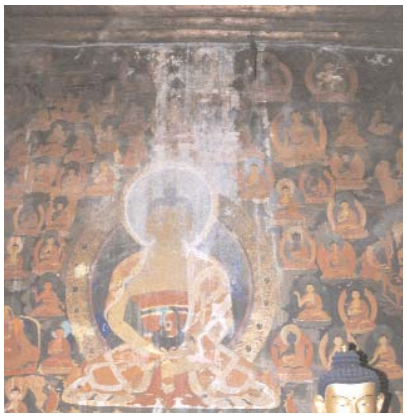
The west wall could only partially be inspected because of a low lying altar and several large sculpture figures obscuring the base of the wall and hindering a full examination. This wall, however, appears to be in the best overall condition. The fact that this is the only exterior wall without windows may contribute to this. There is one area of localized moisture deterioration on the upper section on the south side. There is also a peculiar horizontal band of repainting about halfway up on the south side of the west wall. The plaster also appears to be bulging slightly in this area. On the north side of the west wall there are several quite large cracks. One in particular at the corner of the west and north walls is quite severe and the plaster along the crack appears to be delaminated.



Protector Temple /
Main Hall
Graphic condition recording of the interior west wall showing general patterns of deterioration
August, 2002



Protector Temple /
Interior West Wall
General view looking northwest. Note large crack in corner.



Protector Temple /
Interior West Wall
View of area of localized moisture-related deterioration on the upper section, south side
August, 2002

Protector Temple /
Interior West Wall
General view, note large altar and sculptures obstructing examination of the lower portion of the wall
August, 2002

Exterior, North Wall

On the north wall the Mahakala Temple juts out. The northwest corner dado level is stained with earth indicating that a significant amount of water pools and splashes along the walls in this corner. The northeast corner contains a staircase which is the entrance to the upper floors of the Protector Temple.

Protector Temple / *Exterior North Wall*

General view

August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Exterior North Wall*

General view of northwest corner

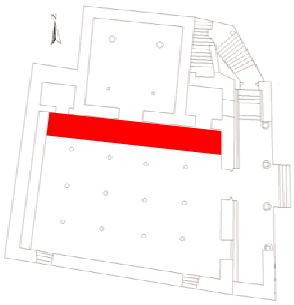
August, 2002

Protector Temple / *Exterior North Wall*

Detail of the base of the northwest corner, note staining and plant growth

August, 2002

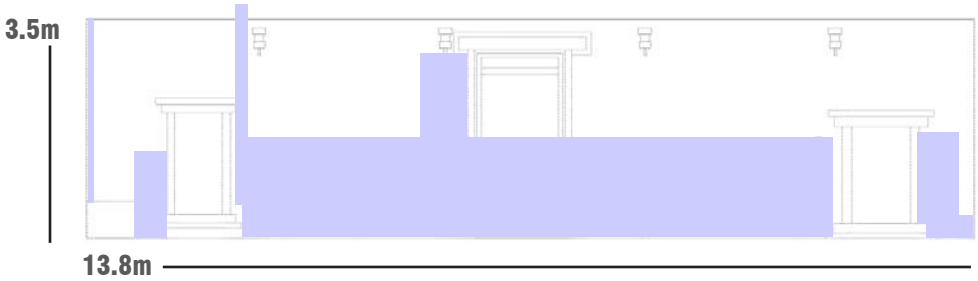
Interior, North Wall



Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Plan indicating location of the interior north wall

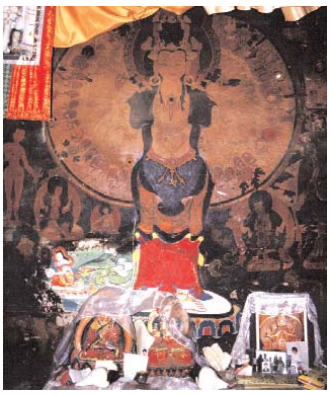
The north wall, the only interior wall, has several localized areas of moisture-related deterioration most notably a large patch (ceiling to floor) directly west of the entrance to the Mahakala Temple and in several areas to the west of the northeast side room. One area in particular holds a bit of folklore to the monastery as "wetting" on an area of painting reportedly reoccurs every year and has thus taken on religious significance. A ceremony is apparently held every couple of years to repaint this one area. There are also losses through to the stone support of the dado repair plaster running along the base of the wall. The area of painting to the east of the northeast side room is particularly heavily abraded. Interestingly, it appears that there are two schemes of paintings present here (as seen on the north side of the east wall) though time did not permit further investigation. Several large cracks run from ceiling to floor and are thought to be associated with movement of the wooden ceiling beams (see Architectural Team Report).



Protector Temple / *Main Hall*

Graphic condition recording of the interior north wall showing general patterns of deterioration

August, 2002



Protector Temple / *Main Hall/ North Wall*

Detail of religiously significant area where "wetting" mysteriously occurs every year

Protector Temple / *Main Hall/ North Wall*

Detail of other areas of painting showing moisture-related deterioration

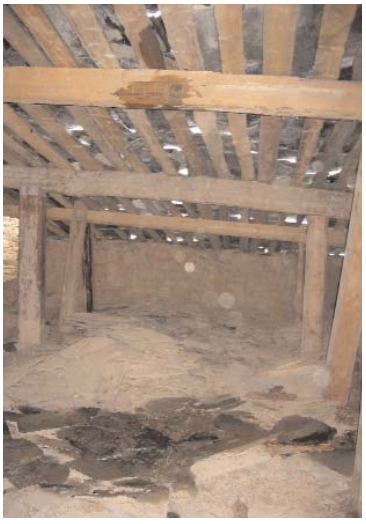
the roof

Though the roof is said to be routinely checked (every twenty days) the roof performed poorly during a heavy rainstorm. In many areas the overlap of the slate was insufficient to prevent water ingress into the building. In fact during one heavy rainstorm a bucket was placed on the ground floor of the protector temple to catch rainwater dripping down through the building. None of the gutters appeared to be functioning properly and water could be seen pouring onto the side of the building and infiltrating into the interior of the building.

Protector Temple /
Roof
View of worker repairing slate roof during a heavy rainstorm
August, 2002

Protector Temple /
Roof
Workers repairing roof from the underside during a heavy rainstorm.
August, 2002

Protector Temple /
Main Hall Ceiling
Painted wooden panels in the main hall showing rainwater penetration during a heavy rainstorm
August, 2002



Protector Temple /
Roof
Underside of the roof showing rainwater penetration
August, 2002

Protector Temple /
Main Hall
Bucket placed on the floor in the main hall of the Protector Temple to catch rainwater during a heavy rainstorm
August, 2002

drainage

Protector Temple / *Exterior*
View of drainage channel running along the east side of the Protector Temple
August, 2002

On the eastern side of the building, which exhibits the same slope as on the western side, new drainage has recently been installed.

A small drain also exists at the northwest corner of the building though where the collected water is drained off to is unclear and warrants further investigation. It is apparent that moisture does collect along the northwest corner of the building though the necessity of installing a drainage ditch along the west side of the building is questionable as the natural slope of the ground already slopes toward the south directing water away from the building corner. There is concern that installing a drainage ditch running along the west side of the building (as on the eastern side) that is not properly maintained may potentially create future problems to the interior paintings on the west wall.

Initial examination of the wall paintings does not appear to show signs of capillary rise. Though the base of the walls have been repainted it is not yet proven that this was due to rising damp. In fact, given the interior position of the paintings compared to how the building sits within the ground supports a case that capillary rise is *not* a problem in the Protector Temple. However, if deemed necessary after further investigation, a liquid moisture survey could be carried out during the next campaign.

original technique

Demands further investigation. Only a brief inspection was carried out during this campaign. The paintings appear to be executed on two layers of plaster. A coarse earthen plaster high in straw content (and possibly yak hair) acting as the initial leveling layer followed by a fine plaster which is quite gray in color. It is uncertain whether a ground was used here though from initial inspection of the painting and literature on Tibetan painting technique this seems likely.

repainting

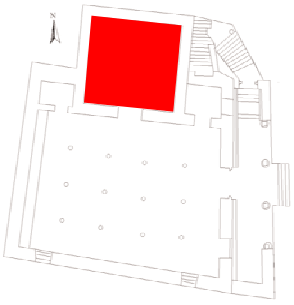
Significant portions of the paintings in the Protector Temple have been restored. According to the monastery only one major campaign of restoration was carried out in the 1980's--most likely soon after the reopening of the Protector Temple in c. 1983. The repainting--which is slightly crude in nature--utilizes what appear to be synthetic pigments which differ quite drastically from the original color scheme and texture. As a result the areas of repainting clearly stand out and are quite visually obtrusive. It is clearly important to the monastery that the overall paintings exist in a pictorially complete manner though addressing the sensitiveness with which this is carried out has not been a high priority. These synthetic pigments are being used not only at Dhe-Tsang but now have widespread use as traditional methods of painting are dying out and are being replaced with these more readily available and easier to use materials. It is our hope to address this issue as there are currently large areas of loss in the Protector Temple which the monastery appears to be thinking of restoring. To our benefit one of our team members, Dolma Tsering, is a mural painter from Qinghai Province. He apprenticed with a master painting learning the traditional methods of constructing wall paintings and he has worked at several monasteries in and around Qinghai.

Goals:

- *Understand the overall plans of the monastery to restore the Protector Temple and Mahakala Temple*
- *Educate/ increase awareness of proper care of wall paintings and more sensitive methods of restoring wall painting using traditional materials and techniques*
- *Research current methods of mural painting technique being taught at the famous artist village of Regong, Qinghai Province*
- *Long-term goal: Revive traditional methods of mural painting*

the building

Recent discoveries prove the Mahakala Temple was once the original Protector Temple of Dhe-Tsang Monastery and existed as a freestanding structure. The present day Protector Temple was later built on to this temple (date unknown). The current Mahakala Temple retains painting on part of the east, south and west walls. The floor level of the temple is slightly raised and is accessed up a short ladder through the doorway on north wall of the main hall. The temple is an open two-story space. A new ceiling appears to have been recently added. It is thought that the ceiling was raised to accommodate two new large decorative dragon columns.



Protector Temple / *Mahakala Temple*
Plan showing location of Mahakala Temple

The original Mahakala Temple structure appears to be a simple three-story stone building. The original roof structure is obscured by objects currently being stored by the monastery. The exterior walls of the original Mahakala Temple are visible and show a few tiny windows on the upper levels. In some areas these exterior walls have been plastered presumably when the walls were converted into interior walls when the current Protector Temple was built on. The exterior walls of the Mahakala Temple on the north and west walls have different stone patterning than the now interior south and east walls. It is thought that the exterior walls were encased in a more decorative stone wall shell probably when the staircase and entrance to the upper floors were added (date unknown).

Protector Temple / *Mahakala Temple*
Exterior view of upper story of the Mahakala Temple

Protector Temple / *Mahakala Temple*
Exterior view of the north wall showing Mahakala Temple

paintings

Protector Temple / *Mahakala Temple*
View of paintings on the south wall
August, 2002

The discovery of the painting in the Mahakala Temple of the Protector Temple is the single most important find of this campaign. The current Protector Temple was initially thought to be one of the oldest buildings in the monastery dating to the founding of the monastery in 1414 CE. However, as a result of recent investigation by the architectural team, it appears that the Mahakala Temple and its paintings predate the paintings in the main hall of the Protector Temple and are therefore potentially the oldest paintings existing at Dhe-Tsang.

Protector Temple / *Mahakala Temple*
Detail of paintings
August, 2002

The paintings in the Mahakala Temple are of a more central Tibetan style, much different from the paintings in the main hall of the current Protector Temple. It is thought that these paintings may provide this regions only link with central Tibetan art.

As little information exists for eastern Tibetan wall paintings and no detailed technical studies have ever been carried out focusing on Tibetan Buddhist wall painting the potential for significant -- groundbreaking -- art historical, analytical and investigatory work to be carried out at Dhe-Tsang is not only necessary but an essential contribution to this field of study.

Condition

The paintings appear quite stable though there are areas of localized flaking most notably on the south wall over the entrance door. The paintings are covered with an even splatter of white paint. It is thought that this may have been a result of airbrushing of one of the large statues in the room. The paint appears synthetic though further investigation is necessary. There is also a fair amount of plaster splatter thought to be associated with the raising of the roof and subsequent replastering which took place. On the east wall there are quite large circular indents in the paintings which look like mechanical damage. A large area of repainting on the east wall is flaking off.

maintenance

Much of the small losses to the wall painting in the Protector Temple appear to be due to mechanical damage. Though a fair amount of this damage may have occurred during the period when the Protector Temple was used as a storehouse a great number of scratches, abrasions and gouges appear to be a result of moving of furniture, and the hanging and removal of banners, thangka paintings, etc. In addition, smoke blackening and splatter from butter lamps can be seen widespread on the west wall and on the south wall. We hope to initiate a simple program of maintenance awareness to avoid further loss of painting in a building that still has much religious activity by conveying an understanding that small abrasions will eventually lead to an overall loss of the pictorial image.

building work

In addition to the large number of new buildings recently built at Dhe-Tsang, including the main prayer hall and dining room, remodeling of a number of the monks' quarters is currently being undertaken. Much work has been carried out since the initial trip was made to Dhe-Tsang in 2001 and it appears much more work is planned in the coming year. Effort is being made to prolong the functional life of many of the existing structures, though sometimes irreparably ruining the original design of the building and as witnessed in some cases destroying the wall paintings within. Though these buildings are often in need of serious work to make them once again functional there is little awareness of the value of the architecture and the wall paintings.

Founder's House

Initial visit to the Founders' House found the building--thought to be one of the oldest buildings c. 1414--undergoing massive renovation. Most disturbing was the remodelling occurring in one of the upper rooms with wall panels being placed on a wooden frame that had been inserted directly through the wall paintings. Though there is evidence that the building was probably unroofed and the paintings exposed to the elements, despite their poor condition there appears to be a fair amount of painting surviving. It is proposed that no further construction work continue in this room until documentation and basic stabilization can be carried out, allowing these paintings to exist safely behind the wooden panelling. We propose the insertion of a false wall that will support the wooden panels and yet not cause damage to the wall painting.

Kata (Monk's Quarters)

This building has already undergone renovation. As a result the exterior paintings have had a new balcony built through the middle of the painting.