

Areas of concern

The Palace of Leh in Ladakh: an example of Himalayan architecture in need of conservation

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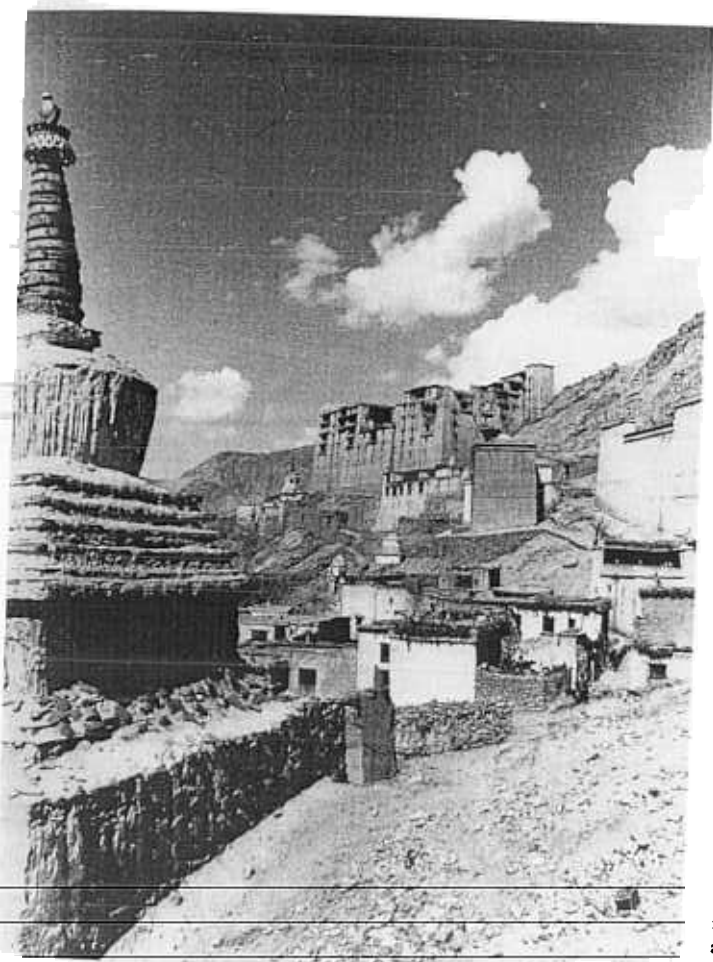


FIG. 1. The eastern approach to the palace. This was the processional route of the royal family and important visitors. (Photo by John Sanday.)

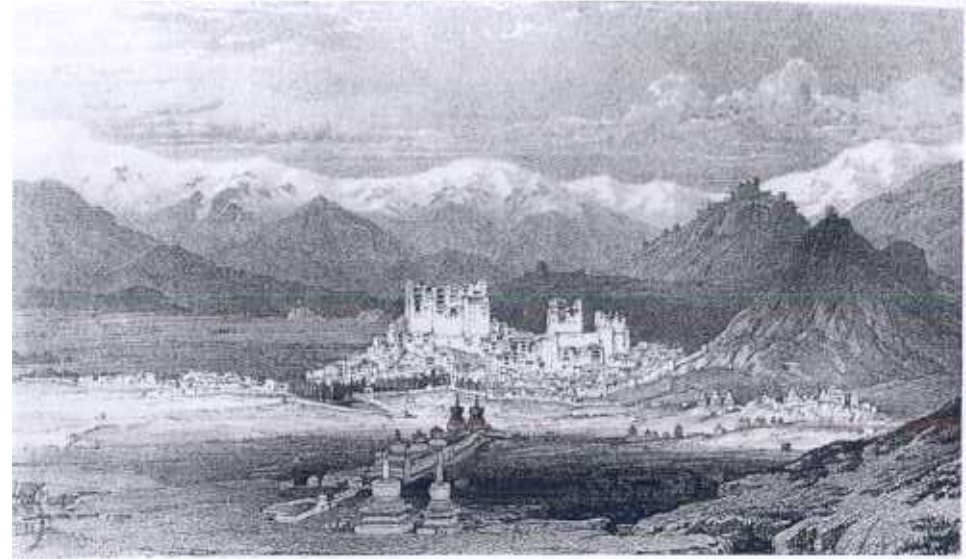
Introduction

The remnant of a magnificent palace, built at the beginning of the seventeenth century during that period when the king of Ladakh ruled over most of west Tibet, still towers above the settlement of Leh, capital of the former kingdom of Ladakh (Fig. 1). This palace is an outstanding example of monumental architecture as represented by the Potala of Lhasa, which was built between 1645 and 1695 by the fifth Dalai Lama.

While the size of the Palace of Leh appears somewhat diminished by the surrounding mountains, on a human scale it is most impressive. The main facade, some 60 m across, is 58 m high, and it rises above all nearby structures both as a colossal fortress, and as an architectural masterpiece (Fig. 2). Today, in its tragic state of decay, not even a photograph can reflect the true grandeur of this great building. It is perhaps helpful to refer to descriptions by earlier travellers to Ladakh, which we have briefly quoted later on.

Such monuments are few in number, and relatively inaccessible to scholars and tourists. However, their importance is considerable, in that they provide critical insights into the high mountain cultures which for centuries have adapted to exceptionally severe environments. It is postulated that no complete understanding of the history of the Tibetan Plateau and its bordering mountain systems can be attained without appreciation of the role and *raison d'être* of the principal architectural

FIG. 2. The south facade.
(Photo by John Sanday.)



remains; nor can proper insights into the relationship between the local cultures and their mountain environment be derived.

It is within this general context that the history, structure and present condition of the Palace of Leh are described here, and the argument put forward for immediate measures towards its restoration and preservation.¹

The palace in history

Leh (Gle), the capital of Ladakh (La-dwags) was first the capital of King Dragpa Bumde (Grags-pa 'bum-lde) who ruled the area of Tö (sTod), the 'Western part' which included Leh, from 1400 to 1440.

Above the palace is the temple of Namgyal Tsemo, built during the lifetime of King Tashi Namgyal who ruled from 1500 to 1532. The nearby villages of Chubi were also founded by this king.

The palace, known as Lechen Palkhar (Gle-chen dPal-mkhar) was built around 1600 by King Senge Namgyal (Senge rNam-rgyal, 1590–1635). According to the local tradition, his father decided to erect a palace above Leh; however, it was Senge Namgyal himself who chose the exact site, on a granite spur shaped like an elephant's head. At the bottom of this ridge, there is an ancient poplar tree whose main trunk lies horizontal while an off-shoot grows vertically, like an elephant's tusk; near this tree, the goddess Tsugtor Lhamo (gCug-tor Lha-mo) lives. King Senge Namgyal gave orders for an important building to be constructed by the local

FIG. 3. A view of Leh in the early nineteenth century. (From Moorcroft, W., *Travels in the Himalayan provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab.*)

¹ The main survey of the palace was carried out by the authors during 1975, and more detailed information on its history and architecture can be obtained from them as this paper must necessarily be brief. The intention behind publishing this paper on the palace is primarily to draw the world's attention to the deplorable state of this unique building.

² "Travels in the Himalayan provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab, in Ladakh and Kashmir", in Moorcroft W., and Trebeck, G., *Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara*, London 1841 (reprint 1971).

The most considerable building in Leh is the Palace of the Raja, which has a front of two hundred and fifty feet, and is of several stories in height, forming a conspicuous object on the approach to the city. This as well as the houses in general, diminishes in extent as it rises, and the whole town at a distance has much the appearance of a cluster of houses of cards. . . .

³ The palace was also described by Alexander Cunningham in *Ladakh, Physical, Historical and Statistical*, London 1854.

The Royal Palace of Leh is a large fine-looking building that towers in lofty pre-eminence over the whole city. It is 250 feet in length and seven stories in height. The outer walls have a considerable slope as their thickness diminishes rapidly with their increase of height. The upper stories are furnished with long open balconies to the south and the walls are pierced with a considerable number of windows. The beams of the



FIG. 4. The palace of Leh. (Photo by Corneille Jest.)

craftsmen for his family, the four *Kalon*, ministers, and the sixty *rGanmi*, elders. It had to overlook the race-course extending east-west. It took only three years to build, and the chief mason was so skilled that the king commanded that his right hand be cut off to prevent the building of another such palace.

The first westerner to describe Leh and the palace was William Moorcroft, who lived in Ladakh in 1820–1822 (Fig. 3).² During the Dogra war (1836), the palace was besieged and the south-western chörten partly destroyed. As a result, the royal family moved to Stok, south of Leh, on the left bank of the Indus. The palace at Leh then lost its function and was never again used as the royal residence.³

In former times, when the magnificence of royal occasions combined with the solemnity of the religious ceremonies, the pageantry and colour one associates with royalty and Tibetan buddhism must have reached its peak in this monumental setting. But, due to the interference of war (1836) and the resulting disruption of the social fabric and the royal government, the palace and its splendours were reduced to near collapse, and the social and religious activities usually celebrated there, almost totally disappeared. The festival of Dosmoche alone survived and, up to 1942, only this New Year festival was observed in the palace. Now the building serves as a mere backdrop to these annual ceremonies, which take place around the twenty-eighth or ninth day of the twelfth lunar month of the Tibetan calendar (in January–February), when monks from

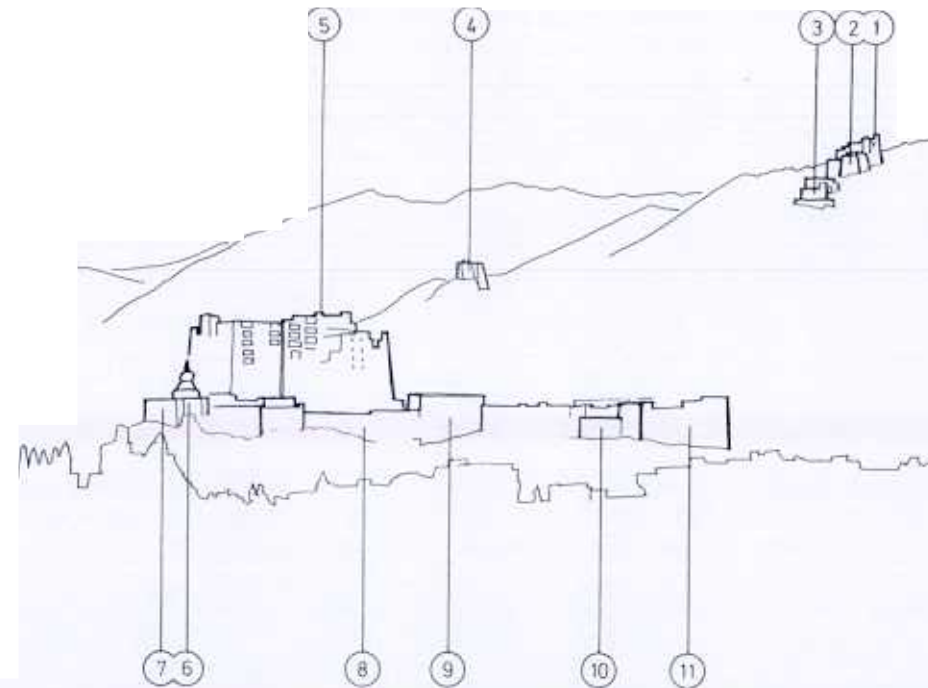


FIG. 5. Location view of buildings in the palace group: 1. Palace fort of Tashi Namgyal; 2. Temple of the Guardian divinities; 3. Temple of Maitreya; 4. Ruin of watch tower; 5. Palace; 6. Chörten; 7. Temple dedicated to Padmasambhava; 8. Royal stables; 9. 'New Monastery'; 10. Temple dedicated to Maitreya; and 11. Temple dedicated to Avalokitesvara.

different monasteries in turn are invited to perform the rituals which ensure both health and prosperity. This is still the great social and religious event of the year, and is attended by both the officials and the people of Ladakh.⁴

The palace and its environment

The Palace of Leh is part of an ensemble of structures which crown the ridge of Namgyal Tsemo (rNam-rgyal rtse-mo) (Fig. 4). The ridge extends several kilometres in length and bears a series of buildings, in differing conditions and stages of decay (Fig. 5). The palace-fort c. 1520 and the Gön-khang (mGon-Khang) temple of the Guardian Divinities, a red coloured temple that contains an image of the six-armed Mahakala, were both built by Tashi Namgyal. Lower down is the temple dedicated to Maitreya. Ruins of circular watch-towers can be seen along the ridge, many of which date from before the time of Tashi Namgyal. Moving to

³ continued

roof are supported on carved wooden pillars, and covered with planks painted in various patterns on the outside. The building is substantial and plain; but its size and height give it a very imposing appearance. . . .

⁴ During the Dosmoche the monks of Trak-Thok (Bragthog) monastery erect a large thread-cross (mDos-mo chen-mo), from which the festival takes its name, and sacred dances are performed in the courtyard of the 'New Monastery'.

the southern side of the ridge, one finds a large chörten located close to the palace and directly below this chörten, a temple of Padmasambhava. Along the same contour, set into the rock beneath the palace, are the stables and the 'new monastery', the Gompa Soma (dGon-pa so-ma) a two-storeyed building dedicated to Sakyamuni, with a large courtyard in front.

At the south-eastern end are two more large temples, one dedicated to Avalokitesvara, the other to Maitreya. The latter dates from the early fifteenth century.

Behind the palace, close to a group of houses known as Chubi, are the spring and reservoir which formerly supplied water to the palace.

Below the palace and its associated buildings, and originally contained within the walls of the old city of Leh, one can still see several interesting buildings in a variety of local styles of the traditional architecture. Today, the city has burst its seams; it now extends well beyond the confines to the old walls, even occupying what used to be farmland (*Fig. 6*).

The palace, a model of Tibetan architecture

The palace building undoubtedly exemplifies the finest traditional

FIG. 6. The city of Leh.
(Photo by Cornille Jost.)



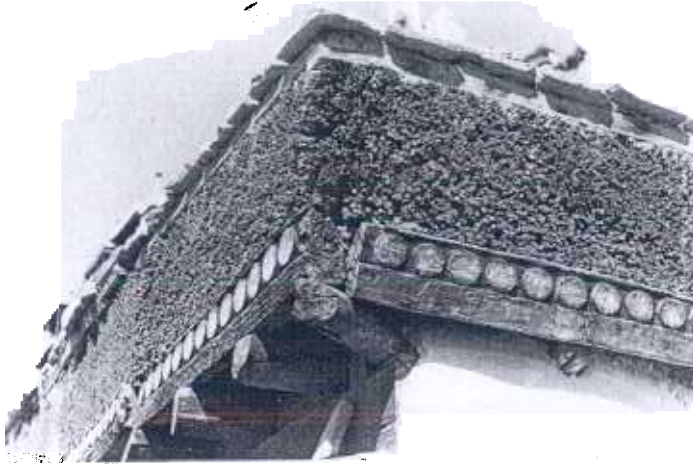
FIG. 7. The palace of Leh in 1930. (From Dainelli, G., *Il mio viaggio nel Tibet occidentale*.)

building technology and craftsmanship in Ladakh. Its layout, structure, materials and decorations comprise what can best be described as Tibetan architecture. Other than its size, its most striking aspect is the battered wall construction (*Fig. 7*).

According to the tradition in Tibetan buildings, there are always nine specific levels. In the palace of Leh, a further two sublevels have been added to compensate for the site conditions. The total height of the structure is nearly 60 m, measuring from the base of the walls on the southern elevation to the summit of the ninth level. In accordance with tradition, the upper section is given over to noble uses—royal apartments, state rooms, throne room, reception halls, two temples and rooms used for religious purposes. The lower sections were for staff, storage silos and stables. In the middle of the building, at the fourth level, the main courtyard (*Katog chenmo*) opening toward the south, is about 40 m above the ground. This was the centre of the social and cultural activities of the royal family and the government.

While actual construction of the palace has been governed by its siting on a granite saddle, it follows methodology for massive masonry construction, with both foundations and cross walls giving buttressed support to the external south wall and the internal spine wall. The heavily battered walls are at least 1.75 m thick at the base and diminish to approximately 0.5 m where the stonework changes to sunbaked brick.

FIG. 8. Detail of a parapet wall, showing the evolution from storing twigs as fuel to their incorporation into the decoration of the building. Note also the circular motifs which represent joist ends. (Photo by John Sanday.)



⁵ In some cases, rooms of considerable size, used as assembly halls, will require a grid of 16 pillars to maintain the structural grid. Another typical feature in this arid zone, are the flat roofs which give little concession to the rains. These roofs often form important terraced areas which can be used for different domestic activities. Their construction is similar to that of the floor, but with a greater thickness of clay laid to a fall. Around the perimeter of these terraces, there are parapet walls which serve not only as barriers, but are intended also to give some protection to the structure beneath.

As the materials available locally are very limited, local stone, in this case granite from Phyang, and the locally grown poplar (*Populus euphratica*), and juniper, which is now no longer available, were most commonly used. To augment these natural materials, the Ladakhi make sunbaked clay blocks, which are commonly used in domestic buildings. As in most architectural styles, various elements of structure that are no longer used are

The foundations are set directly on the rock and follow the contours of the granite saddle. The upper construction, where loads are lighter, is of sun-baked brick, as was traditional in local domestic architecture. Floors are of unwrought timbers which span either the standard structural module formed by the walls or, in the case of the larger rooms, the beams and pillars. A mesh of twigs or scantlings, laid over the beams, carries the clay floor base which varies in thickness (Fig. 8).

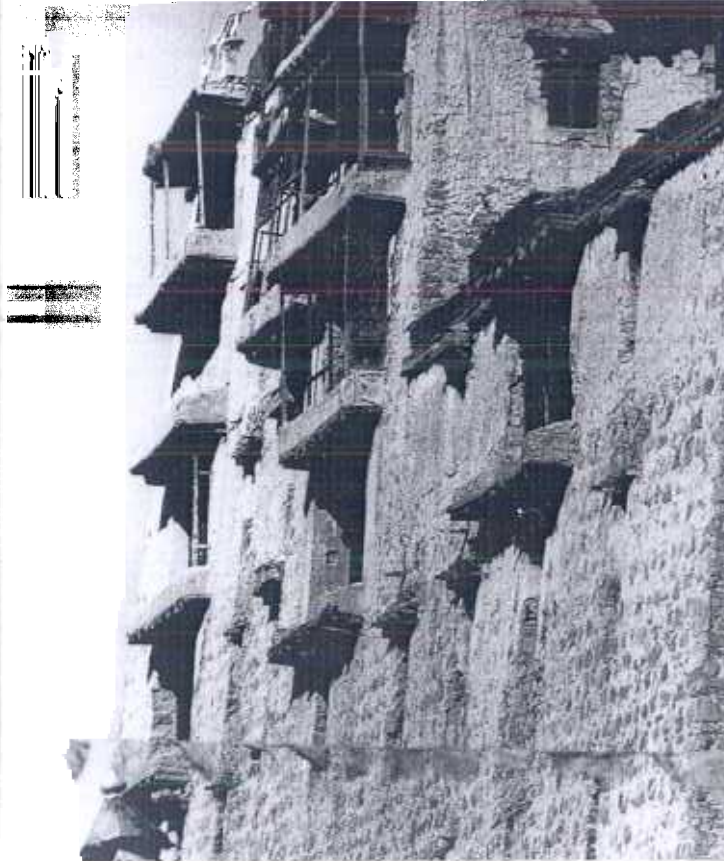
As a room's importance is usually denoted by its size, the number of pillars, the size of the windows, as well as the quality of its carving and decoration are consequently also indicative.⁵

In appreciating traditional Lakadhi architecture, it can be noted how the local materials and skills were used here to their best advantage. One of the most striking features of the palace building is the high quality of the stonework and the finesse that marks the construction of the external walls. The batter of the walls demanded that each stone not only required careful grading, but had to be shaped to follow the batter, coursing and bonding. Introduction of the bonding timbers (*Juniperus*) at approximately 3 m intervals re-establishes the coursing of the stonework throughout the height of the walls.⁶

Rising from the depth of the building is a series of cross-walls or buttresses in granite, forming a *caisson*-like grid, which gives necessary support to the base area of external walling. The upper walls are built of the traditional compact clay blocks (*Ja-bag*), but they do not follow a specific pattern. Bedded in clay mortar, they are constructed in this way to lighten the direct load on the walls below, and are often mixed with random stonework.

The architectural disposition of the windows, their proportions and size, are very characteristic of Tibetan architecture. The window

openings themselves follow a systematic pattern on the facades; those at near ground level are narrow slits, for both structural reasons and for fortification, and also because these rooms are generally used for storage. The rooms at the upper levels become of greater importance as they are used as state rooms and residential quarters, and light is essential. The sizes of the openings are increased accordingly, almost reciprocating the batter of the walls (Fig. 9). To denote their importance, the 'noble' rooms have large projecting balcony-type windows to express the function of these rooms. Externally, the only decoration is the carved trellis work and the simple carvings on the lintels over the windows (Fig. 10). It appears that the building was at one time rendered, as is traditional with Tibetan architecture. Internally, the walls have been plastered with mud plaster mixed with the chaff of barley, and the more important rooms finished with fine clay plaster. The noble chambers have been decorated with



⁵ continued retained in a decorative form. For example, often as decoration over the windows, lintels of a circular line motif are cut out into a board to represent beams ends. Above this a compact layer of twigs set into the parapet wall represents the practice of stacking firewood around the terraced roofs. An interesting external feature of the main south-facing facade is the slight projection of the central section of the building. This is said to represent the pleats or folds in the Lamas' robes—no doubt an effort to try and relate this massive structure to the human scale.

⁶ The probable reason for this was firstly a less solid rock base, and the fact that the walls were built on a far steeper gradient than the rest of the palace. However, it appears that the builders had anticipated such problems by forming the walls to give an external buttressing effect to this weaker structure.

FIG. 9. Southern windows. A typical window pattern showing small openings at the lower levels of the building that fan out to form the more decorative *Rabsal* in the residential areas where light, sunshine and air are important. (Photo by John Sanday.)



FIG. 10. A window over the *katog chen-mo* courtyard at the level of the royal chamber. (Photo by Corneille Jest.)

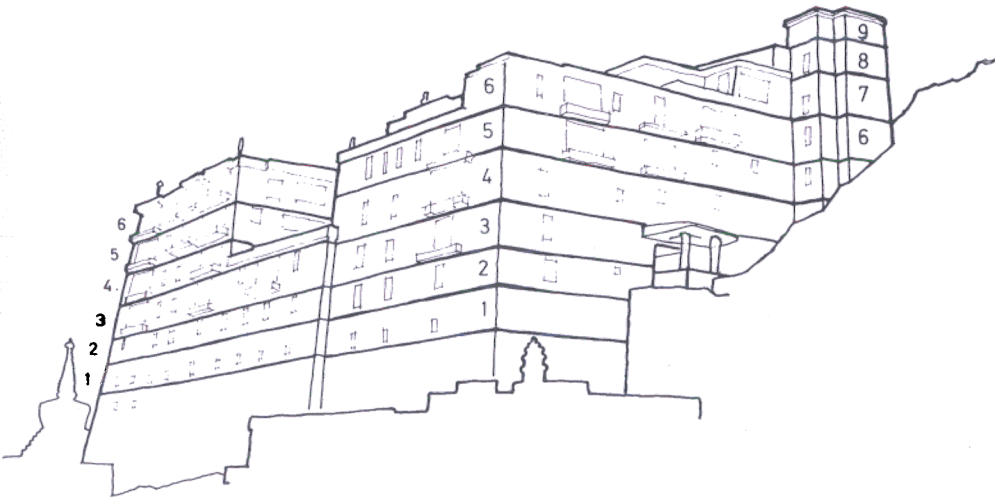


FIG. 11. A diagram showing the levels of the palace.



FIG. 12. On the eastern side of the palace the main entrance porch has an unusual canopy constructed of elaborately carved timber. Probably of Kashmiri influence, it depicts the Snow Lion which was the king's emblem. (Photo by John Sanday.)

water-based colouring, usually light yellow, and the most important are embellished with murals.

Each level had a purpose that affected its planning and character (Fig. 11). From level 1, on the south elevation, there are a series of voids which drop down a further two sublevels, to form the foundation. Externally, these sublevels are expressed by a few small openings not necessarily conforming to specific floor levels.

At level 2, on the eastern elevation, the main entrance to the palace is located under an elaborated porch (Fig. 12). Although this porch must

have been built at the same time as the palace, its style and presence is not in keeping with the rest of the building. The carved head of a lion, emblem of the king (*Sengye*—lion; *Namgyal*—victory) who built the palace, was placed centrally over the door. The entrance corridor, cut into the rock, by-passes this level, and gives access to level 3, but primarily to the courtyard (*Katog chenmo*) at level 4.

At level 3, the foundation grid is established. Here there are a series of silo openings cut into the granite rock saddle approximately 2.60 m in depth along the longitudinal axis of the building.

At level 4 is the main courtyard as well as the temple or Duk-Kar Lhakhang.

Level 5 is particularly important. The main assembly hall, or hall of audience (*Tak chen*), 10.45 × 17.45 m, is located at the south-east corner. This hall was originally reached by a staircase directly off the main courtyard.

Level 6 is the first where the total plan form of the palace becomes apparent. On this level were the main living quarters of the royal family, consisting of both reception and retiring rooms, mostly in the south-eastern portion. The central section was probably occupied by the kitchens (*sol-thab*) and store rooms (*shrol*) with additional living quarters in the eastern section.

Level 7 is the official ceremonial level. Here were three separate sections: the throne-room (*Junga simjung*) the temple (*Sangyeling Lha-khang*) and the east facing royal chamber (*Shar-gi simjung*). The large terraces to the south-east served as assembly areas during official gatherings.

At level 8, the accommodation is reduced to a few ancillary rooms in the north-eastern corner.

Following tradition, the summit of the palace is reached at level 9. It consists of one room (*Tse-simjung*) in the north-eastern corner, where worship to the Gurlha divinity was performed. Although there are probably over a hundred rooms in the palace, there are few that can still be identified, and of considerable importance. The major rooms are as follows:

At level 4, the main temple, Duk-kar Lhakhang (sDugs-dkar Lhakhang) (10.35 × 10.05 m), also called the mThil-gi Lha-khang, situated in the north-west corner, on solid rock. The temple is basically free-standing within its own area, and its individual ground or floor-level is established approximately 1 m above the main courtyard. Access to the temple is accomplished via a porch at the south-east corner, through a doorway, and the main entrance to the chapel is at a right angle to this axis. The chapel is square in plan; the roof structure is supported off a grid of sixteen equally spaced pillars that support a series of beams and joists. Placed centrally in the ceiling is a lantern constructed of timber, panelled and open to the east. Internally on the south wall, stands an embellished

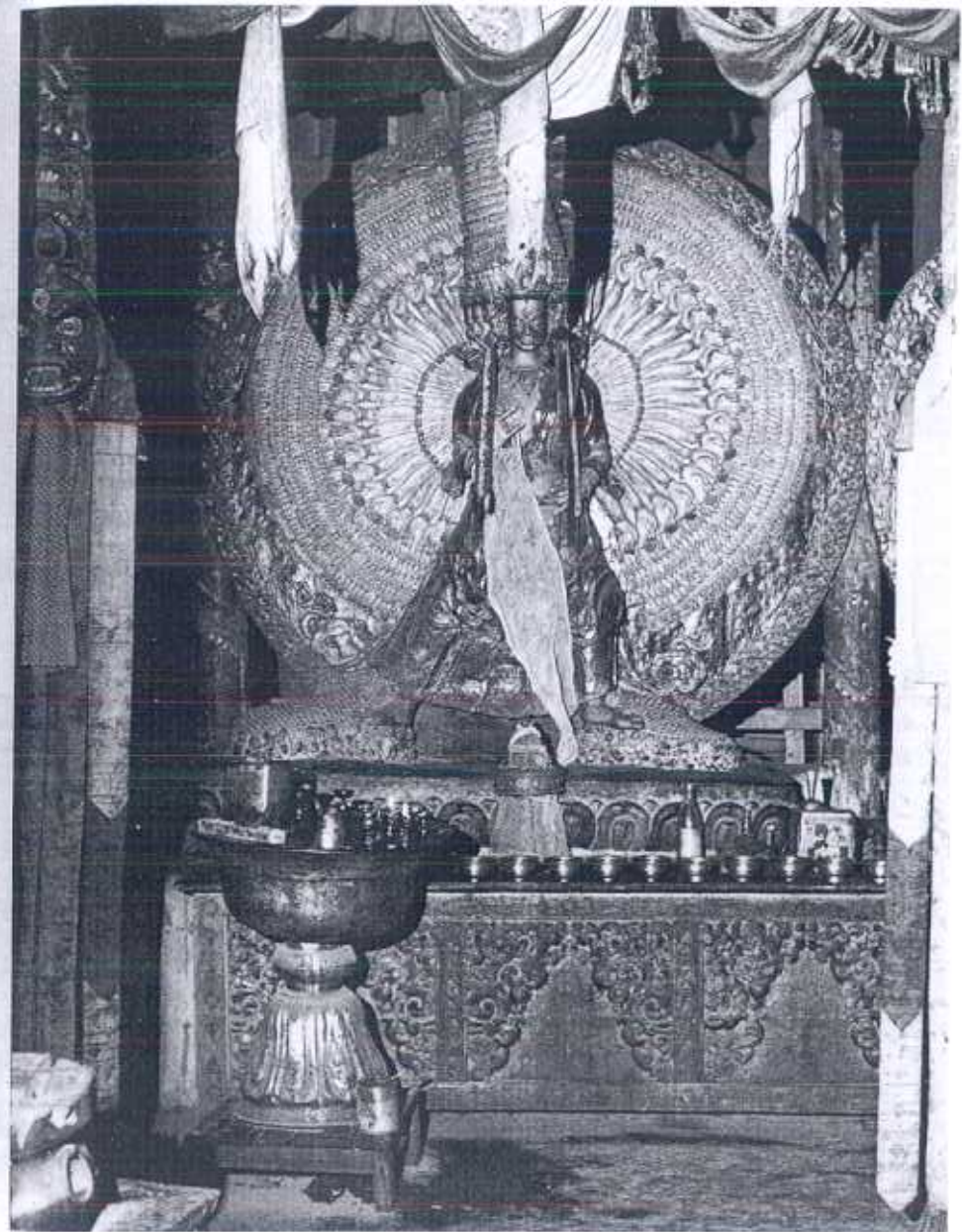


FIG. 13. Duk-kar Lhakhang. The image of Duk-kar (the thousand-armed form of Tara). (Photo by Cornelia Jost.)



FIG. 14. Duk-kar Lhakhang, the southern side with the statue of Drolma and racks for the sacred books. (Photo by Corneille Jest.)

clay image of Ushnishasittapatra (sDug-dkar) which is Tibetan for 'The Lady with the White Parasol' (equivalent to the 1,000 armed form of Tara) (Fig. 13). On the left is a statue of Sakyamuni. On both sides are statues of Padmasambhava, and racks for the 103 volumes of the Kanjur (Tibetan sacred books) (Fig. 14). There are no murals excepting those in the lantern, which depict the life of Sakaymuni in miniature scenes. The treasures of this temple are said to have been taken to the palace of Stok. The temple is looked after at present by the monks of Hemis, and one of them resides at the palace.

At level 7 another temple (*Sangyeling*), 8.50 × 7 m, was located. It was the king's chapel, containing images of Sakyamuni and Drolma.

The hall of audience (*Tak-chen*), 10.45 × 17.45 m, occupies the south-east corner of level 5. On the northern side of this spacious hall was a partly enclosed throne. There is an opening or atrium centrally placed in the ceiling of the hall. Its roof is supported by a grid of bracketed, decorated pillars. This was the hall where ministers and members of the government met.

Level 7, the official ceremonial level, contained the throne-room (*Jungra*

simjng) (12.66 × 7.30 m) which overlooks the main courtyard. This impressively proportioned room has a ceiling supported by a row of carved and decorated pillars. The throne itself is set on a slightly raised dais; it was in this state room that the king used to meet the delegates from Tibet. The large terrace at the south-west served as assembly area during official gatherings.

The palace today

After the Dugra war, the royal family left Leh and resided in a palace at



FIG. 15. The collapse of part of the south-eastern structure due to the removal of a pillar at level 4. At level 5 the pillar has literally punched through the floor, but at level 3 the structure has re-established itself. (Photo by John Sanday.)

Stok. To this day the palace of Stok is still occupied by the descendants of the royal family.

The palace of Leh is totally abandoned, inhabited only by a single caretaker who still performs the daily act of worship in the temple. Following its abandonment, and lack of maintenance, the structure is now very dilapidated and, in fact, collapsing (*Figs 15 and 16*). Owing to the less durable clay-block or brick construction at the upper levels, roofs and walls have been eroded, and continual water penetration has caused structural failures and collapses with cumulative effects. An unexpected failure in the north-west corner has caused that part to crumble (*Fig. 17*).

Added to these failures, extensive vandalism in several areas has accelerated the dilapidation of the palace, and has caused the major portion of the structure to become totally unsafe and hazardous to visitors. Many of the pillars have been ripped out for use as firewood, the former state rooms have been ransacked, and wall paintings defaced. Unless immediate action can be taken to repair and consolidate this majestic landmark, it will soon fall into a state of total ruin. It is therefore recommended that the following emergency measures be undertaken.

FIG. 16. The east elevation of the palace, showing the present condition. Note the majority of the collapsed sections are built of sunbaked bricks. (*Photo by John Sanday.*)



1. For the safety both of the palace and human life, all visitors should be prevented from visiting or entering the building, and an official guard should be posted to prevent further vandalism.



2. All dangerous sections of the palace should be dismantled carefully to prevent further collapse, and all debris carefully removed from inside.
3. Structural propping should be inserted throughout the weaker portions to support areas in danger of collapse.

FIG. 17. The north-east corner from level 7 looking into *Sangyeling* temple, now collapsed. The construction at this level is in sunbaked brick, and its dilapidated state is due to neglect and severe weather conditions. (*Photo by John Sanday.*)

It is recommended, once the above emergency work has been carried out, that a detailed survey should be done to assess the structural damage, and budget estimates for a repair programme should be drawn up.

At the same time, proposals for a future use of the building should be put forward to enable the raising of funds to assist in the repair, maintenance and operation of the palace complex.

To make such a renovation project viable in the present time of economic stress, it is essential to establish some revenue-earning areas in the palace. For example, the lower section could serve as an ethnographic museum for the display of the regional people's life style, as well as of the local arts and crafts. The middle section, which could include the state rooms and main courtyard, would serve as a fine setting for a cultural and historical museum of Ladakh, where the development of Buddhism in this area could be traced, and the function of Ladakh in regard to the ancient silk route and trade across Central Asia be displayed.

Upper levels of the palace, when repaired and restored, could be used for offices.

Proposals for infusing new life into this historic monument would surely add to the cultural tourism attractions of Leh where there is little to offer to visitors besides the palace. If such proposals could materialize and be set in operation, they would ensure the future of this unique example of cultural and architectural heritage.

Those who have had the opportunity of visiting Leh have in general been greatly impressed by the palace of Leh and feel strongly that it should be preserved. However up to the present time no successful means have been found either under the Central Government of India or the State of Jammu and Kashmir to acquire the palace and secure the funds needed for its conservation.

Résumé

Les restes d'un palais magnifique, construit au début du XVIIIe. siècle, à l'époque où le roi de Ladakh régnait sur la plupart de l'ouest du Tibet, domine toujours la petite ville de Leh, capitale de l'ancien royaume de Ladakh. Ce palais est un exemple de première qualité de cette architecture monumentale que représente le Potala à Lhasa, construit entre 1645 et 1695 par le cinquième Dalai-Lama. La façade principale du palais de Leh, longue d'environ 60 m, a 58 m de haut et se distingue de toutes les constructions aux alentours non seulement par son caractère de forteresse colossale mais aussi par sa qualité de chef-d'oeuvre d'architecture. A l'heure actuelle, la photographie même n'arrive pas à refléter la grandeur véritable de ce bâtiment superbe dans sa déchéance tragique.

Le palais, connu sous le nom de Lechen Palkhar (Gle-chen dPal-mkhar) a été construit vers 1600 par le roi Senge Namgyal (Senge rNam-rgyal), et le travail a duré, d'après les annales, trois années. C'est le roi qui a choisi l'emplacement, sur un contrefort de montagne qui avait la forme d'une tête d'éléphant, et la tradition veut qu'une fois le palais terminé, le roi a fait trancher la main droite au maçon principal, pour l'empêcher d'en construire un autre. Des voyageurs de l'Occident l'ont décrit pour la première fois au début du XIXe. siècle, mais à cette époque-là la famille royale s'était déjà installée à Stok, sur la rive gauche de l'Indus, et ne s'est jamais resservie du palais de Leh comme résidence royale. Il sert maintenant d'arrière-scène aux cérémonies du Nouvel-An, au cours desquelles les moines tibétains observent les rites qui assurent la santé et la prospérité.

Le contrefort sur lequel s'élève le palais s'étend sur plusieurs kilomètres, et porte une série de bâtiments qui sont tous dans des conditions et des étapes différentes de délabrement. Au pied du palais et des

structures associées, et sur le site entouré autrefois par l'enceinte originale de la vieille cité de Leh, il existe toujours plusieurs exemples intéressants des styles d'architecture traditionnelle, mais c'est le palais lui-même qui fait preuve de ce qu'il y a de meilleur dans la technologie traditionnelle de la construction et dans l'artisanat de Ladakh.

La tradition de la construction au Tibet veut qu'il y ait toujours neuf étages bien délimités auxquels s'ajoutent, dans ce palais, deux niveaux inférieurs pour compenser les obstacles du site. La hauteur totale est de 60 m environ, mesurée du pied du mur au côté sud jusqu'au sommet du neuvième étage. En accord avec la tradition, le haut du palais est réservé aux usages nobles: les appartements royaux, salles d'apparat, salle du trône, salles de réception, deux temples et d'autres pièces réservées aux usages religieux. Les niveaux inférieurs étaient destinés au personnel, aux entrepôts et aux écuries.

Les fondements des murs en maçonnerie massive se posent directement sur le rocher, et le fruit des murs les fait diminuer de 1.75 m à la base à 0.5 m à l'endroit où la brique crue prend la place de la pierre. Les planchers sont faits de bois non façonné, couvert d'un réseau de brindilles sur lequel se pose la base d'argile du plancher même. L'importance d'une pièce se voit à sa grandeur, à la quantité de piliers en bois sculptés, à la taille des fenêtres et à la qualité des sculptures et du décor. Les ouvertures des fenêtres sur les façades suivent un développement systématique, et vont en s'agrandissant depuis les petites fenêtres en brèche au pied des murs jusqu'aux grandes fenêtres en saillie qui forment comme des balcons aux salles 'nobles' et qui sont parfois décorées de treillis sculptés.

Chaque étage du palais avait sa propre affectation qui a déterminé sa disposition et son caractère. La grande salle d'assemblée se trouvait au cinquième

niveau, la résidence royale au sixième, les chambres pour les cérémonies officielles au septième, tandis que le temple principal se situait au quatrième, avec accès direct à la cour principale.

Aujourd'hui le palais est complètement abandonné, habité par un seul gardien qui fait toujours le culte quotidien au temple. Le bâtiment est très délabré et à certains endroits il tombe en ruines. Au coin nord-ouest une défaillance inattendue a laissé s'écrouler toute cette partie du bâtiment. Des actes de vandalisme ont amené l'arrachage des piliers sculptés pour faire du bois à brûler, le pillage des anciennes salles d'état, et la dégradation des peintures murales. A défaut d'action immédiate pour réparer et consolider ce monument majestueux, il sera bientôt voué à la ruine totale. A la fin de cet article nous proposons des mesures d'urgence à prendre, y compris l'étayage des structures et le démantèlement des parties dangereuses, et la garde à monter. Ensuite il faudrait procéder avec urgence à un examen détaillé de la structure, et faire des prévisions budgétaires. Nous proposons que les niveaux inférieurs et intermédiaires soient affectés aux usages de musées et les étages supérieurs aux bureaux. Nous estimons que de tels travaux augmenteraient les attraits de Leh dans le domaine du tourisme culturel, là où il n'existe à l'heure actuelle que peu de chose en dehors du palais, mais ils assureraient surtout l'avenir de cet exemple unique du patrimoine culturel et architectural. Cependant, que ce soit sous le Gouvernement central de l'Inde ou sous celui de l'état de Jammu-et-Cachemire, personne n'a encore réussi à trouver les moyens d'acquiescer le palais et d'assurer les finances nécessaires à sa conservation.

Resumen

Restos de un magnífico palacio construido a principios del siglo diecisiete, durante el período en que el rey de Ladakh gobernaba sobre la mayor parte del Tibet occidental, se alzan todavía por encima del caserío de Leh, capital del antiguo reino de Ladakh. Este palacio es un notable ejemplo de arquitectura monumental como la representada por el Potala de Lhasa, construido entre 1645 y 1695 por el quinto Dalai Lama. La fachada principal del palacio, de unos 60 m de ancho, tiene 58 m de altura, y se levanta por encima de todas las estructuras cercanas tanto a manera de colosal fortaleza como de obra de arte arquitectónica. Actualmente, en su trágico estado de ruina, ni siquiera una fotografía puede reflejar la verdadera grandiosidad de este edificio.

El palacio, conocido como Lechen Palkhar (Gle-chen dPal-mkhar), fue construido alrededor de 1600 por el rey Senge Namgyal (Senge rNam-rgyal), y

según los documentos se completó en tres años. Escogió su emplazamiento el monarca, en una estribación granítica en forma de cabeza de elefante, y se dice que cuando estuvo terminado el palacio mandó que le cortasen la mano derecha al arquitecto principal para evitar que pudiera construir otro. Fue descrito por primera vez por viajeros occidentales a principios del siglo diecinueve, pero ya entonces la familia real se había trasladado a Stok, en la orilla izquierda del Indo, y el palacio de Leh ya no volvió a emplearse como residencia real. Hoy día sirve de telón de fondo a las ceremonias de Año Nuevo, durante las cuales los monjes tibetanos efectúan los ritos que aseguran salud y prosperidad.

La sierra en la que está construido el palacio se extiende a lo largo de varios kilómetros y contiene una serie de edificios en diversas condiciones y grado de ruina. Por debajo del palacio y edificios asociados, originalmente dentro del recinto de las murallas de la antigua ciudad de Leh, todavía pueden verse varios ejemplos interesantes de los estilos locales de la arquitectura tradicional; pero el propio palacio testimonia la mejor técnica constructiva tradicional y la artesanía de Ladakh.

De acuerdo con la tradición de los edificios tibetanos, existen siempre nueve niveles específicos, y otros dos subniveles se han añadido al palacio para compensar las condiciones de su emplazamiento. La altura total es de cerca de 60 m, midiendo desde la base de las murallas de la parte sur hasta la cima del noveno nivel. Según la tradición, la sección superior se destina a usos nobles: apartamentos reales, dependencias de estado, sala del trono, salones de recepción, dos templos y habitaciones para uso religioso. Las secciones inferiores eran para los sirvientes, silos de almacenamiento y establos.

Los cimientos de las macizas y maltratadas murallas pétreas están directamente sobre las rocas, y las propias murallas disminuyen su grosor desde 1.75 m en la base hasta 0.5 m, donde la piedra se convierte en adobe. Los pisos están hechos de madera sin desbastar, cubierta de una capa de ramitas o escantillones que soportan la base arcillosa. La importancia de una habitación la indica su tamaño, el número de columnas de madera esculpida, el tamaño de las ventanas, y la calidad del esculpido y decoración. La luz de las ventanas sigue un estilo sistemático en las fachadas, aumentando de tamaño a partir de estrechas rendijas en la parte inferior, y las habitaciones 'nobles' tienen grandes ventanales salientes a modo de balcón que, a veces, están adornados con un enrejado esculpido.

Cada nivel del palacio tenía un destino que afectaba su planificación y carácter. El salón principal de reuniones se hallaba en el nivel 5, las dependencias de

la familia real en el 6, las salas de ceremonias oficiales en el 7, mientras que el templo principal se hallaba en el 4, con acceso desde el patio principal.

El palacio se halla totalmente abandonado, habitado por un solo cuidador que sigue llevando a cabo el culto diario en el templo. La estructura está muy dilapidada y hundiéndose en algunos sitios. Un fallo inesperado en el ángulo noroeste ha hecho que éste se hunda. Se dan también abundantes casos de pillaje que resultan en arrancar columnas decorativas para destinarlas a leña, en el expolio de antiguas dependencias de estado y en la destrucción de pinturas murales. Si no se toman medidas inmediatas para reparar y consolidar este soberbio hito, pronto se convertirá en una ruina total. Este artículo concluye recomendando medidas de

urgencia, entre ellas las de afianzamiento estructural, desmantelamiento de secciones peligrosas y empleo de vigilantes. Así pues, es urgente preparar un estudio estructural completo y un presupuesto. Se propone que la sección inferior y la sección media se destinen a museos, y la superior a oficinas. Se cree que esto aumentaría las atracciones del turismo cultural hacia Leh, donde existe poco que ofrecer a los visitantes, aparte del palacio; pero, sobre todo, esto aseguraría el futuro de este ejemplo único del legado cultural y arquitectónico. Pero hasta la fecha no se han conseguido los medios de adquirir el palacio y de obtener los fondos necesarios para su conservación ni por el Gobierno Central de la India ni por el Estado de Jammu y Cachemira.