

**LADAKHI TEMPLES OF THE 13TH-14TH CENTURY:
KAN-JI LHA-KHANG IN SPU-RIG AND ITS ANALOGIES WITH
GU-RU LHA-KHANG**

ROBERTO VITALI

Rome

Kan-ji

If one reaches the extreme western limit of La-dwags in the land called sPu-rig by the Tibetans and walks across a long gorge to the south towards the Zangs-dkar range, after more than half a day of strenuous walking, the valley opens up to a wider area where four mountains meet at a spot marked by an idyllic Tibetan village. Here stands the small *lha-khang* of Kan-ji, which has been almost neglected by the Tibetan literature and has also escaped the attention of the western specialists. Kan-ji is the spelling adopted in the earliest mention of this name known to me (the Wan-la inscription, on which see below). Other spellings are known at present, among them the Tibetanized version Gangs-bzhi referring to the four mountains surrounding the temple and the village by the same name, while Kan-ji seems to be a non-Tibetan name.

It is a *lha-khang* made of a single holy room of rather reduced dimensions and simple rectangular plan but its importance gives to it a place of preeminence among the temples of La-dwags. It is called Lo-tsa-ba'i lha-khang, which is a reference to the supreme translator Rin-chen bzang-po (958-1055), by the people of the village of Kan-ji, yet it does not bear major signs of religious works dating back to the late 10th or the first half of the 11th century, unless they have been obliterated by subsequent renovations, which is a realistic possibility. Its attribution to Rin-chen bzang-po seems to

be almost inevitable since practically all the temples of considerable antiquity in West Tibet are popularly attributed to him.

However, some lions functioning as beams of the roof could be a sign that the temple was built during the period in which Rin-chen bzang-po was active since they are examples of a functional and stylistic matrix found in various *lha-khang* dating to the 11th century, which has to be traced back to Kashmiri prototypes. Other temples in sPu-rig and bordering La-dwags-gsham composed by a single isolated room and possibly being early examples of the genre are the dilapidated *lha-khang* at Bla-ma g.yu-ru, whose name has not been preserved, and the ruined structure at Cig-tan, whose faded murals, which were still faintly visible in the days when Francke visited it, have disappeared in the meantime.

Architectural typologies of temples built during the 10th-11th century in West Tibet follow according to the categories which are classified here:

- 1) temples having a mandalic plan (examples of which are found at Tho-gling and Nyar-ma);
- 2) temples with a cruciform plan (see those existing at Nyar-ma and Na-ko etc.);
- 3) temples of the *gtsug-lag-khang* type (of which those at Ta-bo and Nyar-ma are noteworthy);
- 4) temples comprising a single room (i.e. four walls without recesses) (see, for instance, those at Mang-nang, lHa-lung, Na-ko, A-lci 'du-khang etc.);
- 5) temples enclosed by other chapels containing a monumental statue (those extant being at gSum-mda' and Mang-rgyu).

Although it cannot be completely ruled out that it was founded during the period of the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, Kan-ji lha-khang contains at present monumental sculptures and murals painted in the Tibeto-Pala style popular in Central Tibet during the late 12th and the 13th centuries, when, in particular, the bKa'-brgyud-pa sub-schools were established. The monumental evidence provided by these religious works in this temple leads one to wonder about the time in which this style reached the western regions of Tibet, brought here by the bKa'-brgyud-pa and in particular the 'Bri-gung-pa.

The religious and political developments following the end of the period of some eighty years (1193-1277/80), in which the 'Bri-gung-pa were the most influential sect in West Tibet when they monopolised these lands, are of utmost importance. Another temple in La-dwags, which is discussed below, sheds decisive light on this most obscure period. Therefore, the treatment adopted in this article is to study monuments to assess cultural history rather than to attempt a description of their art styles.

The only literary reference to Kan-ji during the 'Bri-gung-pa period in West Tibet is found in the long inscription on the ground floor of Wan-la gSum-brtsegs in lower La-dwags not too far from sPu-rig. Wan-la gSum-brtsegs is a temple whose actual shape was established around 1240 (see Vitali 1996: 385-89 for a dating of its inscription to those years), but this epigraphical mention refers to the area of Kan-ji rather than to its *lha-khang*.

A much decayed inscription in *dbu-med* located in the premises of Kan-ji *lha-khang* testifies to local patronage, which does not help to assess the temple historically. Disappointingly, the condition of the inscription does not allow a safe reading. Entire portions are missing and lacunae are found in crucial places, often obliterating personal names.

The text of the inscription is divided into various sections and opens with a description of the land of Kan-ji in mythical yet realistic terms. It continues by mentioning the religious kings of the Yar-lung dynasty and then Nyi-ma-mgon, the founder of the mNga'-ris skor-gsum kingdom, together with his successors, in accordance to the literary tradition which says that the rulers of mNga'-ris skor-gsum descended from those of Yar-lung. It contains an interesting reference to the warfare between Nyi-ma-mgon and the rGya-pa jo belonging to the Ladakhi dynasty of Dards who ruled this land before the former's conquest (see Vitali 1996: 324-27). It then relates the activities in favour of Buddhism carried out by the individual who established Kan-ji *lha-khang* in the shape that has survived until now, as well as by his clan, but their names are sadly defaced. Had these local people, whose names have been lost, not been known, it could not be ruled out that they had to remain historically unassessed since the inscription in this section does not offer any help in the form of some reference to better known personages or events.

A short mention of the religious cycles of Kan-ji *lha-khang* follows, which identifies as sPyan-ras-gzigs, sGrol-ma and sMan-bla the three statues of the

lha-khang and says that a few *mandala* and the deeds of Buddha were painted on its walls. These statues are substantially coarser than the accompanying murals, which is not an uncommon fact in West Tibet although rather surprising. In fact, this is a recurring aspect in the West Himalaya where at an earlier time (i.e. during the period of the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet), some clay images made in the style of Kashmir, which found popularity and local adaptation in West Tibet, are rather crude. This is the case with statues at Na-ko (Tibetan spelling-uncertain) in sPi-ti, some of them at Ro-pag in Kinnaur and even on the shrine in the style of Kashmir inside the Seng-ge-sgang at Bla-ma g.yu-ru.

The beautiful wall paintings in the Tibeto-Pala style of Kan-ji *lha-khang* are a clue to the period in which the temple might have taken the shape that has come down to this day, and especially testifies to the fact that this *lha-khang* was among the earliest in La-dwags which was painted and sculpted according to this idiom before the style underwent local adaptation and contamination at a later time. Examples of these modifications are the temple of sPyan-ras-gzigs bCu-gcig-zhal at dKar-sha in Zangs-dkar and subsequently the caves at Sa-spo-la at the border between upper and lower La-dwags.

Analogies with Gu-ru *lha-khang* and the Sa-skyapa presence in La-dwags

The Tibeto-Pala style of Kan-ji is found with remarkable similarities in Gu-ru *lha-khang* near Phyang in upper La-dwags. The structure of this temple is also quite close to that of Kan-ji *lha-khang* (they both consist of square, bare rooms with no windows, and consequently light comes from the door), but it does not have monumental sculpture. Gu-ru *lha-khang* is also locally credited to Rin-chen bzang-po but no signs linking this *lha-khang* to the 10th-11th century are there, indicating thus that attribution of Kan-ji *lha-khang* to Rin-chen bzang-po (at least in the shape which has come down to present time) is questionable. The former temple has been already documented visually (see the pictures under the heading 'Gu-ru *lha-khang*' in Genoud-Inouhe 1978, and LoBue 1985, figs. 5-12) but its inscriptions have not been published. They testify to the fact that it was built by the Sa-skyapa, since masters of this sect are not only portrayed in its murals but also identified in the accompanying inscriptions.

Those in the Gu-ru lha-khang naming these *bla-ma* are found on its rear and right walls (in sequence from left to right) and poorly read with many spelling mistakes: 1) 'mChos-rje 'Jam-yang phyag-tshan zhugs (*sic* for Chos-rje 'Jam-dbyangs tshan-chan bzhugs)', 'the one bearing the name 'Jam-dbyangs is [depicted] here'; 2) Sa-lding-pa bla-ma sTob-brtan zhugs (perhaps *sic* for Sa-skyia lding-pa bla-ma sTobs-brtan bzhugs?'), 'Sa-lding-pa bla-ma sTobs-brtan is [depicted] here' otherwise less probably 'the Sa-skyia flying bla-ma sTobs-brtan is [depicted] here'; 3) slab-bzang pan-mchen zhugs (*sic* for pan-chen bzhugs)', 'the noble disciple pan-chen is [depicted] here'; 4) bZang-ldan khan-po zhugs (*sic* for mkhan-po bzhugs)', 'bZang-ldan mkhan-po is [depicted] here'; 5) Sa-skyia' pan-chen zhugs (*sic* for Sa-skyia pan-chen bzhugs)', 'Sa-skyia pan-chen is [depicted] here'; 6) mChos-rje bla-ma dam-'ba zhugs (*sic* for Chos-rje bla-ma dam-pa bzhugs)', 'Chos-rje bla-ma dam-pa is [depicted] here'. The only master among those enumerated in this *lha-khang* whose fame went beyond the limits of La-dwags would be the one named Sa-skyia pan-chen in the inscription, if this name denoted no one less than Sa-pan Kun-dga' rgyal-mtshan (1182-1251), despite some variance in their titles. Given the time difference between the years in which Sa-pan lived and the approximate date in which Gu-ru lha-khang was built, Sa-skyia pandi-ta's lifetime is a useful *terminus post quem* to assess when Gu-ru lha-khang was made a Sa-skyia-pa temple, if the attribution of its foundation to Rin-chen bzang-po is considered reliable.

However, another inscription placed below the image of bDe-mchog on the left wall of Gu-ru lha-khang identifies in chos-rje Rin-zangs the maker of this *lha-khang* with the support of un-named local sponsors. This is conclusive proof that this Rin-zangs cannot be confused with Rin-chen bzang-po, otherwise the latter would have established a Sa-skyia-pa temple in La-dwags some time before his death in 1055, at a time when Sa-skyia had not yet been founded.

Given the similarity of the early Tibeto-Pala style of the Gu-ru lha-khang murals with those in Kan-ji lha-khang, the former temple seems to be contemporary or at least close in time to Kan-ji lha-khang. The Sa-skyia-pa authorship of Gu-ru lha-khang is invaluable in helping to approximate with better precision the sequence according to which these two temples were decorated.

The only literary mention which irrefutably proves the period of Sa-skyapa control of West Tibet is a passage of *Si-tu bKa'-chems* by the great t'ai-si-tu Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan in *Rlangs Po-ti bse-ru* (p.113 line 11-p.114 line 8). He says that it began in the years between 1277 and 1280 and continued at least until 1361 (Vitali 1996, Addendum Three: 556-61). In this period the Sa-skyapa established Gu-ru lha-khang. This time in the history of mNga'-ris skor-gsum is particularly obscure to the point that almost no events are recorded concerning territories such as Gu-ge, La-dwags and Glo-bo, as if historical memory has been obliterated during the Sa-skyapa domination of West Tibet. It is therefore especially significant that monumental evidence coming from Gu-ru lha-khang confirms the rare notion held by an author as authoritative as Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan on the political condition of West Tibet during the Yuan/Sa-skyapa period.

Matters of chronology

On stylistic and architectural grounds, the *lha-khang* at Kan-ji has to be related to Gu-ru lha-khang and has therefore to be considered a work made either during the Sa-skyapa tenure of mNga'-ris skor-gsum or slightly earlier. These alternative hypotheses concerning the chronology of the two temples need to be briefly discussed.

The Sa-skyapa are credited with having introduced Newar artists to the plateau north of the Kathmandu Valley soon before they became the undisputed leaders of Tibet, which corresponds to the bKa'-brgyud-pa (especially 'Bri-gung-pa) period in West Tibet. Subsequently, the stylistic development of the Newar idiom brought to Tibet by means of the invitation of Newar artists to Sa-skyapa was accomplished by Aniko at the imperial court. I have defined this as the Newar Style of the Yuan Court (see Vitali 1990: 103-10).

Since the Newar style of the Yuan Court was introduced at Zhwa-lu from China around 1307 and became thus property of the Sa-skyapa milieu, one has to analyse the religious works of Kan-ji and Gu-ru lha-khang to find out whether influences from that style can be detected or not and thus whether the temples were decorated before or after the divide falling around 1307, when the influence of the manner of depicting the deities employed at Zhwa-lu started to be felt in Tibet.

As a matter of fact, the treatment of the painted images adopted at Kan-ji is entirely in accordance with the Tibeto-Pala style without further insemination of other conventions to depict its religious themes; it therefore does not betray signs that the Newar Style of the Yuan Court was employed there. On the contrary, the Tibeto-Pala idiom at Gu-ru lha-khang shows trace of the intervention of stylistic elements belonging to the Newar Style of the Yuan Court, since a point of contact with the wall paintings at Zhwa-lu gSer-khang is found there and pertains to the style of the rGyal-chen sde-bzhi ('Guardians of the Four Directions'), which is not too far from their depiction at the former temple.

It is remarkable that the Sa-skyapa did not use at Gu-ru lha-khang the Newar styles (i.e. the original one which was introduced to Sa-skyapa by the Newar mission headed by Aniko and the successive one developed by him at the Yuan court) which were adopted by them in Central Tibet, except for the instance of an isolated iconographic theme. This testifies to the hold of the Tibeto-Pala idiom brought by the bKa'-brgyud-pa to West Tibet. Judging by the extant temples in West Tibet, it seems that the Newar Style of the Yuan Court did not become popular in La-dwags while it was employed in Gu-ge, where it underwent local adaptation.

Stylistic considerations (i.e. a closer adherence to the Tibeto-Pala originals of Central Tibet) therefore seem to favour a date slightly earlier for Kan-ji lha-khang than for Gu-ru lha-khang. It is difficult to say whether the religious works of the former temple date to the end of the 'Bri-gung-pa period' (i.e. 1277-1280), which preceded Sa-skyapa control of West Tibet. The 'Bri-gung-pa are recorded in the Wan-la inscription (Vitali 1996: 389 and n. 627) to have been the religious masters of the Dardic rulers of rGya-shing (the ancient name of the area of Wan-la in lower La-dwags which included Bla-ma g.yu-ru), who also controlled Kan-ji some time after 1240, but no mention of the 'Bri-gung-pa is found in the Kan-ji inscription. Epigraphical evidence that both temples benefitted from local patronage does not help to clarify the sectarian affiliation of these *lha-khang*, which is only elucidated by the inscriptions in Gu-ru lha-khang.

On the other hand, iconography at Kan-ji lha-khang helps to solve this problem, since a 'Bri-gung-pa master is painted on its rear wall near the triad of statues. His sectarian affiliation is recognizable by the robes he wears. His personal identity, however, remains uncertain as he has neither particularly

distinctive features that might identify him as any teacher of this sect nor an inscription accompanying his depiction. Another temple the 'Bri-gung-pa controlled in La-dwags, apart from Wan-la gSum-brtsegs, was Bla-ma g.yu-ru Seng-ge-sgang, both in the same area not far from Kan-ji. The portrait of a 'Bri-gung *bla-ma* in Kan-ji lha-khang is important since it is instrumental in ascertaining that Kan-ji was the last of the 'Bri-gung-pa temples of West Tibet rather than the first of those of the Sa-skyapa and must have been made in the shape which has survived to this day some time before the 1277-1280 divide.

It is therefore likely that the making of the 'Bri-gung-pa temple of Kan-ji lha-khang was the enterprise of the same rulers who enjoyed a resurgence of their power around 1240, since no political changes are recorded as having apparently taken place after the local Dardic lords of La-dwags recovered their ancient power until the 1277-1280 divide. However, this absence of information on political events affecting the lands of La-dwags is not definite proof that the rulers of Wan-la rGya-shing were controlling Kan-ji when its *lha-khang* was founded and more corroborating evidence is needed to elucidate the matter. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that Kan-ji lha-khang falls in the period in which a local resurgence was experienced in La-dwags, although the identity and the local origin of the ruler responsible for it cannot yet be clarified. On the other hand, the Sa-skyapa affiliation of Gu-ru lha-khang better specifies the extension of this power's control in the lands of mNga'-ris skor-gsum farther than Gu-ge and Pu-hrang, which is documented by the literature (see *Gung-thang gdung-rabs* pp.108-09 and Vitali 1996, Addendum Three).

The Ar clan of La-dwags and accounts of alleged heresies

In the same way as at Kan-ji, testimony to local patronage at Gu-ru lha-khang is found in an inscription inside the latter temple. A lineage of lords, who seemingly belonged to the territory where the temple is located, is depicted and identified on the wall to the left of the door. This inscription documents the sponsorship of the temple by the Ar clan. This clan came into the limelight of Buddhist attention, emerging from the obscurity of Tibetan ethnic groups, because of the Ar-tsho ban-de bco-brgyad ('the eighteen monks of the Ar division'), who are seen by the tradition as the epitome of religious deviance.

These alleged heretical masters, who supposedly practised ritual murder and preached liberation by means of sexual union, are documented to have been active in Central Tibet in the late 11th century. The most extensive known biography of the great O-rgyan-pa Rin-chen-dpal (1230-1309), who owes his name to the fact that he went on a perilous pilgrimage to the land of Swat (Tib. O-rgyan) where the great Padmasambhava is recognized to have been born, relates that two ancestors of his were severely threatened by the Ar-tsho monks in Central Tibet when the former were on their way to Sa-skya for their studies (*O-rgyan-pa rnam-thar rgyas-pa* p.7). They were captured, tied with ropes and were going to be killed but they put on a display of their magical powers, freed themselves from the ropes and made the heretical monks repent and convert to more orthodox forms of practising religion. Although not specifically documented in the sources, they could also have been present in West Tibet a little earlier in the 11th century than one can assume on the basis of the episode involving O-rgyan-pa's ancestors since tradition holds that the need for eradicating their heresy was the reason which prompted the invitation of Jo-bo-rje to West Tibet, where he sojourned in the years 1042-1045:

A group of local rulers and their queens, whose name is identified by related inscriptions, firmly establish the diffusion of the Ar clan at least in upper La-dwags. In detail, fourteen brief inscriptions accompany a row of fourteen portraits, six of them being of male rulers, seven of queens or princesses and one of the religious master Rin-zangs (*sic*), epigraphical mention of the latter possibly being at the basis of the belief that the founder of Gu-ru lha-khang was Rin[-chen] bzang[-po]. The six male personages are identified in the inscriptions as Phe-co sKyid-sring-mo rGyos (*sic*), Ar 'Od-ma, jo Khyi-tsug-sde (*sic*), jo Ar 'Bum-sde, jo Ar rGyal-sde and jo Ar bTsan (the latter probably being the ruler at the time of the making of Gu-ru lha-khang, as well as its builder, given that his portrait is of larger scale). The queens are a-ma jo-jo dNgos-grub, jo-jo Srid-'dzin, jo-jo rGya-gar, jo-jo bSam-grub rgyal-mo, jo-jo 'Ag-tsus-tsha (*sic*), jo-jo U-'ab and jo-jo dPal-srid-'dzom.

If Gu-ru lha-khang was painted in the last quarter of the 13th century or soon thereafter, as is most likely, six generations of local Ar clan members depicted on its walls would push the occupation of the Phyang area in upper La-dwags by exponents of this clan back to around the late first half of the 12th century, if the possibility that they represent a lineal descent of successive generations in the clan is accepted.

The importance of finding inscriptional documentation proving that the Ar clan occupied at least parts of the La-dwags territory is that for the first time the claims found in the literature concerning the presence in West Tibet of the Ar clan, of which the Ar-tsho ban-de bco-brgyad were members, is substantiated locally. The Gu-ru lha-khang inscription is the earliest local document known to me testifying to this fact.

Neither the account in the biography of O-rgyan-pa nor the inscriptions of Gu-ru lha-khang in upper La-dwags refer to the mid 11th century when Jo-bo-rje was in West Tibet. However, the mention of members of the Ar clan patronizing a temple in La-dwags seems to make the possibility that the invitation of Jo-bo-rje by the great members of the royal family of Gu-ge to disseminate Indian Buddhist tenets, as opposed to heretical Tibetan ideas of the same religion, more realistic than a simple exemplary account, and that West Tibet may have well been the theatre for the practices of the monks of the Ar clan.

Historical coincidences seem to confirm this view. The misdeeds of the Ar-tsho ban-de are placed by the biography of O-rgyan-pa in gTsang La-stod (also see *Gu-ru bKra-shis cho-'byung* p-375). In *Chos-legs rnam-thar* (f.27b-f.28a) a chief of the gTso-tsho-ba (a nomad clan inhabiting southern Byang-thang) is mentioned fighting in 1445 against A-mo-ga, a son of king A-ma-dpal of Mustang and the commander of its army. The gTso-tsho chief is named Ar-dpon, his brother rTog-med being subsequently mentioned in the same work (*ibid.* f.30a-b). On these grounds, it cannot be ruled out that the Ar-tsho ban-de active during the *bstan-pa phyi-dar* were members, allegedly practising heresies, of this nomadic clan. This hypothesis is plausible in the light of the fact that the gTso-tsho-ba settled down in La-stod lHo, following the migration of their ancestors from mNga'-ris skor-gsum towards the end of the 11th century, before moving again towards the west (*Chos-legs rnam-thar* f.8a-b). Hence since they were settled in the Gu-ge area before their easternly journey, it is possible that the Ar clan was in mNga'-ris at the time of Jo-bo-rje's invitation.

The fact that members of the Ar clan are found among the nomadic clans occupying in the 15th century, and thereafter the territory where the sources of the Brahmaputra are located, indicates that the diffusion of this clan encompassed at least in different periods a huge expanse of lands from La-

dwags to the southern ranges of the Tibetan Byang-thang not too far from Mustang.

A few conclusions have to be drawn which sum up historical, geographical and artistic considerations. From the historical viewpoint, Kan-ji and Gu-ru lha-khang are tridimensional testimony of the fact that the 'Bri-gung-pa, who became the main controllers of the three territories of mNga'-ris (Gu-ge, Pu-hrang and La-dwags) in the late 12th-early 13th century, had to concede their West Tibet stronghold to the rising Sa-skyapa some one hundred years after their advent in the region.

From the viewpoint of cultural geography, it seems that the expanse of lands on which the 'Bri-gung-pa exercised their influence (from Tibetan Byang-thang in the east upto sPu-rig in the west, which is the territory at the door of Kashmir) was subsequently controlled by the Sa-skyapa, who replaced this bKa'-brgyud-pa sect. It has now become clear that the Sa-skyapa held control of the lands at least until upper La-dwags, while it is not certain that sPu-rig was also under their dominance.

Finally, from the artistic viewpoint, the Tibeto-Pala style of Central Tibet, where it was particularly employed by the bKa'-brgyud-pa schools, travelled with them to give substance to the foundation of their settlements in West Tibet and subsequently found local adaptation. When the Sa-skyapa took over, they adopted the style of the 'Bri-gung-pa, while few elements of the idioms, which they themselves caused to be introduced in Tibet, were incorporated into the pre-existing West Tibetan adaptation of the Tibeto-Pala style.

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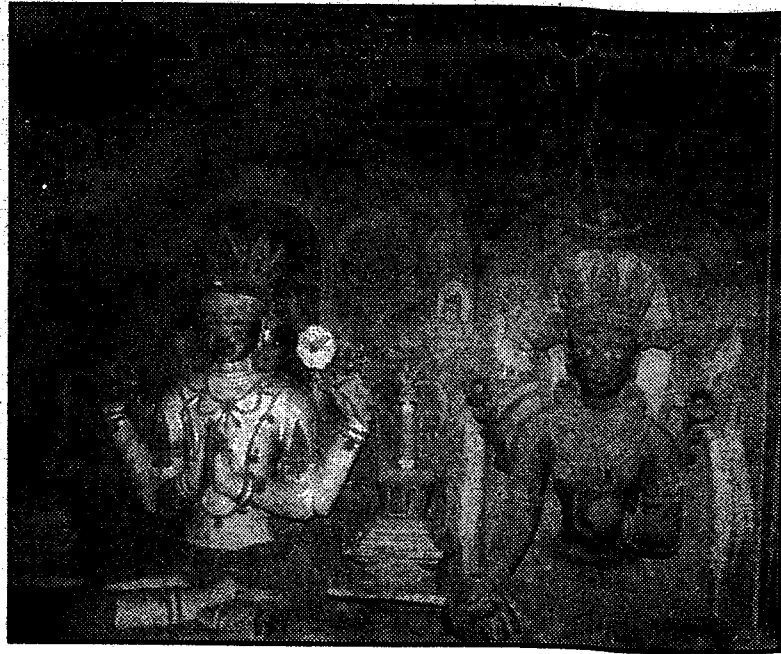
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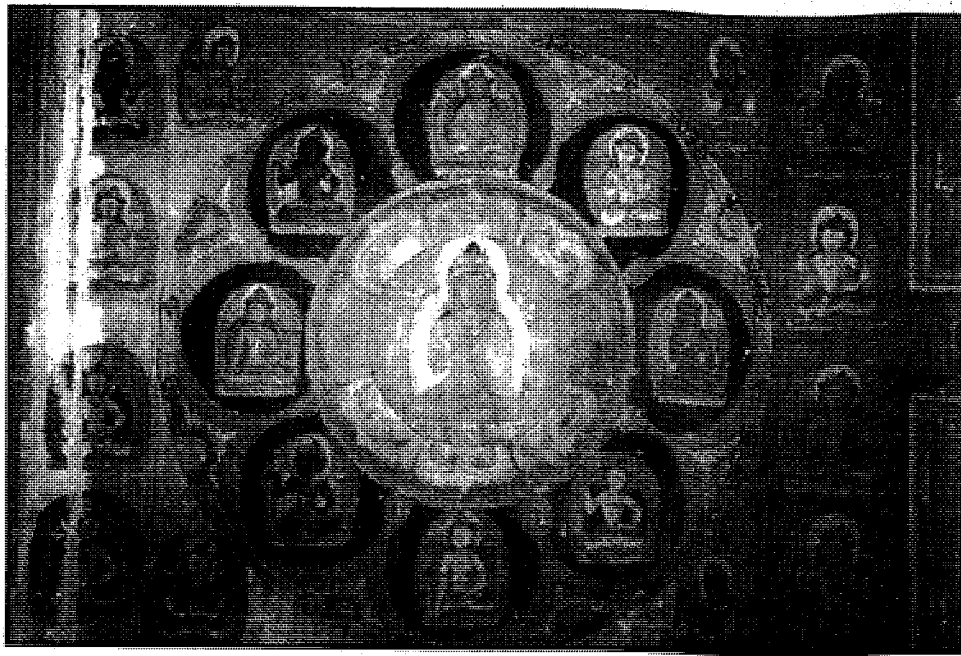
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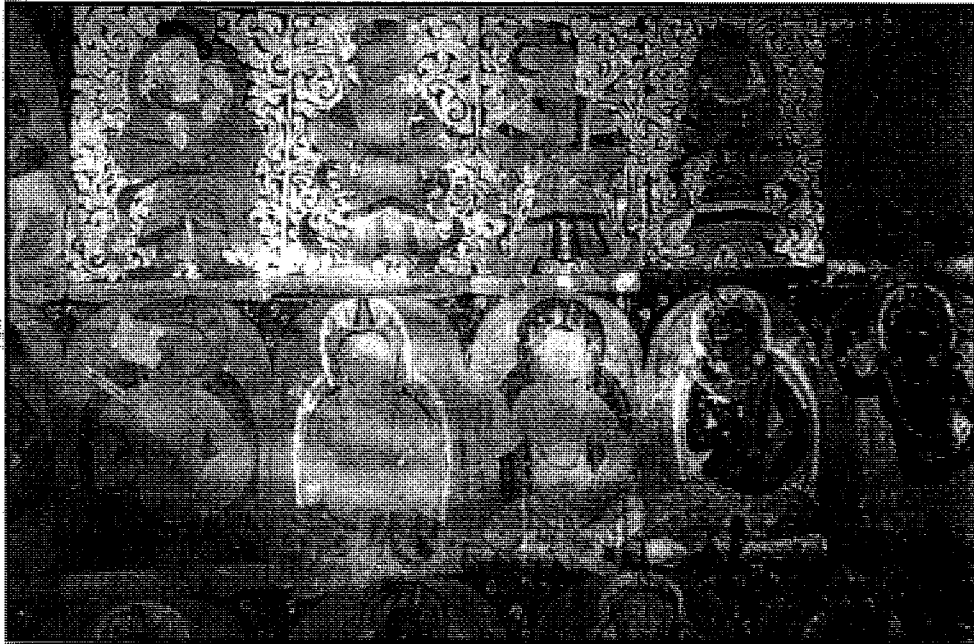
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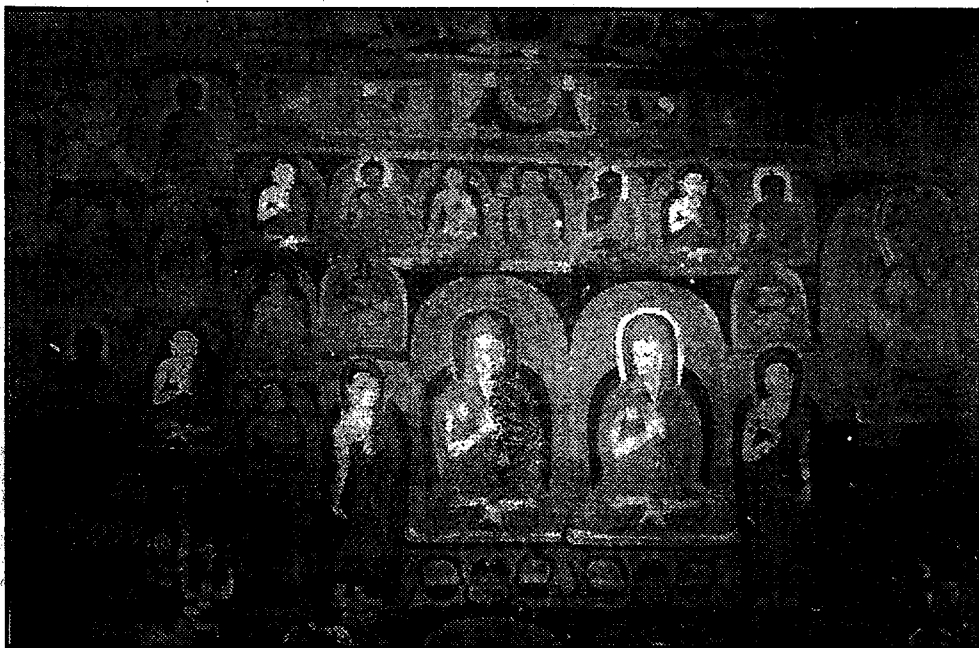
sPyan-ras-gzigs and sGrol-ma. Clay statues. Kan-ji lha.khang (sPu-rig). Second half of the 13th century.



Detail of a *dkyil-'khor*. Mural. Kan-ji lha-khang (sPu-rig). Second half of the 13th century.



rGyal-chen sde-bzhi. Mural. Gu-ru lha-lhang (Upper La-dwags).
First half of the 14th century.



Two Sa-skyapa *bla-ma*. Mural. Gu-ru lha-khang (Upper La-dwags).
First half of the 14th century.