



1. The protective deity Vajrapāṇi on the main wall of the Sanctum of Lo Gekhar; the original murals of the sanctum likely date to the mid 17th century.

Seismic Strengthening and Restoration of Lo Gekhar

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Project Report, First Year, Fourth Quarter – July to September 2021

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Report Narrative

Despite the obstacles due to COVID-19 the planning of the restoration of Lo Gekhar's main building could be completed this quarter. This includes the documentation of parts of the monument not previously documented, namely the murals in the sanctum (Figure 1) and the panels of the Chenrézik Lhakhang (Figures 3 and 7), both of which turned out to be decisive for a better understanding of the building's history. The restoration plan has been refined and its details have been discussed with the caretaker and the villagers who agreed to them in a meeting.

The quarter's work was concluded with the preparation of an inauguration ceremony during a visit of the US-Embassy's Public Affairs Chief Garrett Wilkerson and Dhurba B. Shah, Public Engagement Specialist, which will lead into the second year of the project. In the last days of September, Kunjon Thakuri could also discuss the restoration project with the director of the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, who visited Mustang at that time.

Discussion of the Restoration Plan

July was dominated by the discussion and refinement of the restoration plan and first assessments of the materials needed to be purchased, including price estimates. Points of discussion mainly centred on the utilization of parts of the structure now scarcely used, the possibility of moving the stone panels in areas of the living quarters to the rooms above the assembly hall, the location and number of bathrooms needed, and alternatives for the current staircase leading up to the caretaker's rooms. The plans were adapted accordingly by Thomas Schrom, and they form the basis of the estimates of materials needed for the restoration.

Site Visit

Due to Covid restrictions, the visit to the site by Christian Luczanits needed to be planned long term and included mandatory quarantines in Kathmandu and Lower Mustang. Until the last moment, it was also uncertain if he could visit the site at all, as attaining the permits necessary turned out to be extremely difficult and labour intensive. Eventually, all permissions could be secured at the last moment and included the payment of an unjustified 'fine' for a second ACAP permit.

The beginning of the visit was dedicated to setting up posters informing about the restoration. The frames for these had been ordered in spring locally. Further, we recorded videos for the virtual meeting with the US embassy which was due the next day.



2. One of the posters to inform about the restoration project was set up at the back of the temple. Given the works in the surrounding of the temple, it was important to place them in a way that makes clear that this project only concerns the main building. The circumambulation path in the foreground now also is a road.

Otherwise, the visit to the site in late August had three main purposes: the completion of the documentation by Christian Luczanits, the verification and refinement of details of the restoration plan on-site, and the confirmation of the support of the caretaker and the villagers for potentially problematic details of the restoration plan. Further, an online meeting with representatives of the US Embassy was planned to introduce Public Affairs Chief Garrett Wilkerson virtually to the site. While this meeting took place, the poor internet connections in Upper Mustang resulted in considerable delays before we were able to make the videos made available online.

Documentation

While Christian Luczanits has documented a part of the site already, focusing on portable works shown to him in 2014, the so-called Chenrézik Lhakhang (Avalokiteśvara Temple) and the murals of the main sanctum still needed to be documented before the restoration. This documentation turned out to be extremely informative, as it clarified the historical context of major parts of the decoration. Remarkably, each of the stone relief panels featuring a form of Ṣaḍakṣara Lokeśvara in the Chenrézik Lhakhang are accompanied by inscriptions commemorating the completion of 100 million recitations of the deity's mantra. They always provide a date, the year in which the recitations were completed, often a person in whose memory the recitations were done, and occasionally the carver of the relief.



3. Panel with Śaḍakṣara Lokeśvara in the Chenrézik Lhakhang the inscription of which reads as follows:
 “Worship to Lokeshvara. We are taking refuge to and respectful bow to the most exalted, excellent Avalokiteśvara. To fulfil the intentions of the highest mother Nyida Gyelmo, [the recitation of] hundred million (*dung phyur*) mani were accomplished (*sgrub pa*) in the water male dog year (1682/83). Whatever very white merit was assembled [through this recitation] may the intentions of this highest mother thoroughly be fulfilled and may all beings who have become parents without remainder swiftly attain the omniscience of a Buddha. Auspiciousness. Relief design by Pandar Gyelpo.”

As such, these stone panels are an invaluable source of historical information that obviously still needs to be exploited in full. The inscriptions translated so far confirm what has already been proposed by other data but provide unprecedented precision. From these texts it is clear that the site flourished from the middle of the 17th century and the earlier assumption that the stone reliefs most likely date to the second half of this century can be confirmed. Further, the inscriptions provide approximate dates for the death of Queen Nyida Gyelmo in or before 1682/83 (Figure 3),¹ of her husband king

¹ The Tibetan dates are given in a sixty year cycle, each year leading into February of the next year. Since the inscriptions commemorate the completion of the recitations, they likely were done at the very end of the respective year, so in this case in January or February 1683.

Agön Samdrup Rapten a year later, and of a prominent Drukpa School teacher called Mipham Püntso, who is also depicted in a sculpture at the site, in or before 1712/13. For none of these the dates of their passing are recorded in the textual sources of which studies are available so far. Given that their activities and representations are related to or found in other monuments in Mustang, this is of wider relevance to the history of the region.



4. Original and restored sections among the murals in the sanctum of Lo Gekhar, the original paintings above painted directly on the wall, and the restored ones on canvas and glued to the wall. Often the latter is accompanied by a small portrait of Katok Rikdzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755), providing a clue for their approximate date.

A detailed study of the murals in the sanctum was equally rewarding and clarified that they most likely also date to the beginning of this period of flourishing, that is the mid-16th century (Figures 1, 5). While they do not provide a conclusive date for their making, the fact that they have been restored in the mid 18th century under Katok Rikdzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755) indicates that they predate his activities in the region, which are amply documented in other monuments as well. In contrast to the original murals, the mid-18th century restorations are painted on textile and are accompanied four times by small illustrations of Tsewang Norbu, who can be recognised by his distinctive dress (Figure 4). This further adds to the impact of this teacher's visit to Mustang.

Iconographically the walls of the sanctum are almost completely covered by the wrathful protectors of the five esoteric Buddha families, each deity having the colour and attribute that characterizes the respective family. Large depictions of them are distributed across the sanctum by direction (Figure 4) with two on the main wall flanking Padmasambhava representing the centre (Figure 1) and the eastern direction. Two teacher representations above these do not provide any definitive clue regarding their making. These main deities are complemented by Hayagrīva and another Vajrapāṇi represented in the niches flanking the main wall. Four female animal-headed gatekeepers flank the sides of the entrance. The origin of this unique iconographic program still needs to be clarified, but the seven main deities certainly do not represent the eight pronouncement deities—a group very prominent in Nyingma School monuments—as the caretaker assumes.



5. The green protector wielding a sword above the entrance to the sanctum.

While large sections of the murals have been photographed, proper documentation of all painted surfaces has been made impossible by the window screens introduced throughout the room in recent years. While these protect the murals in the niches from visitors as well as the soot of butter lamps, they also make them less visible, and the murals on the projections between the niches and in the entrance area are still exposed. Among the damages to the murals, the ones on the right side wall are most

alarming and may be due to occasional water seepage. This side of the building thus needs special attention during restoration.



6. Condition of the courtyard on top of the assembly hall some hours after heavy rain, with large parts of the roof retaining the water for considerable periods and softening the clay. The image also documents the lack of regular maintenance.

Refining the Restoration Plan

The heavy rains preceding the visit also allowed us to assess the building under these conditions and see the problems first hand. These include pools forming on the roof, water seepage into the rooms underneath—including the “VIP room” we slept in—issues with the drainage, and a softening of the roof clay to a degree that it cannot be walked on anymore (Figure 6). Further, the photographic documentation of the main building and the site as a whole was updated and now includes the recent changes to the site, including the new construction directly in front of the main temple.

As the architectural assessment has shown, the temple as it is preserved today is the result of many historical interventions, often smaller ones adding new rooms on top of old ones. In fact, the current ground level of the left side of the building stands on a basement with hollow spaces of earlier rooms. The condition of these rooms needed to be verified. For this purpose, two labourers were employed to clean up a storage room above a hollow section and open access to the space underneath so that it could be assessed. As expected, the condition of the lower spaces is poor and restoration work

has to start at that level. If necessary for the stability of the building these spaces may need to be filled up.



7. View of the Chenrézik Lhakhang that is also used as a retreat room. The seat in the back of the room is used by the practitioner and the wooden cabinets along the side are used to store the ritual offering cakes (*torma*).

Detailed discussions with the caretaker indicate that the lower spaces are best used for hosting the visitors to the temple. To make this possible we consider the lowering of the floor level of the atrium (L09 on the plan provided by Thomas Schrom) and the storage room behind it (L11) as well as the addition of windows in continuation of the existing ones lighting the atrium. L11 would then serve as a kitchen room, while L12 remains storage. Further the stairs leading up to the upper floor may be replaced if a suitable solution can be found.

On the upper floor, the stone panels of the Chenrézik Lhakhang (Figure 7; U15) and the Caretaker's room (U07) will be moved to rooms U04 and U05 above the assembly hall, which are currently used as storage. This separates the retreat rooms from those visited by worshippers and tourists and makes these panels accessible at all times. To facilitate the visit of these rooms the floor of U03 needs to be paved in some form, which also will improve drainage. We are also looking into the option of roofing the entire space U03 (Figure 6) with a modern solution that does not disturb the overall appearance of the temple. Further, the clay floor of the upper story of the sanctum (U01) needs to be replaced by a wooden one.

On the monastic's quarters side, the ceiling level will be slightly raised and levelled across all rooms to simplify drainage. We also consider an additional bathroom in the

space of U08 that can be accessed from both U10 and U07, while the existing one will be expanded and modernised. Otherwise, the room usage and layout remains as is with the kitchen now the personal kitchen for the caretaker and those using the retreat rooms while visitors can be served tea in the atrium on the ground floor. Of course, the skylights of U14 and U09 need to be improved with solutions that are permanent and require little maintenance. The overall goal of all these measures is to separate retreat spaces from those used by the visitor's and to make living in these parts of the building less of a hardship.

Community Discussion

The visit finished with a community assembly at Marang at which the main points outlined above were discussed with the villagers (Figure 8). In particular, the moving of the stone panels and the replacement of the floor above the sanctum needed broad approval, which was attained. Further, it was decided that the local committee for Lo Gekhar, as it had been formed the year before, would be retained.



8. Villagers of Marang assembled in the community hall for discussion on 1st September 2021.

The meeting lasting more than two hours also resulted in a broader discussion about recent changes afflicted to the site and the plans by the local government and other agents to replace the buildings in front of the temple with modern ones (Figure 12). From this discussion, it became clear that the majority of the villagers disapprove of some of the recent interventions and feel that the site should be retained more or less unchanged. However, they also say that if they express their objections that they are not listened to. It was, thus, agreed that both the local committee and the Norbusum

Foundation create a proposal for a master plan for the site that is then finalised in a joint meeting. The villagers were also strongly encouraged to expand their committee and to include outside representatives to counterbalance the power of local political agents.

To make sure that the planned measures are fully understood by the villagers the members of the committee were also requested to come to the site the following morning. At this visit, all the details about the planned measures were presented to the committee members on-site and also different options for the master plan were discussed (Figure 9). The planned measures were agreed to without objections.



9. Members of the committee discussed details of the planned restoration measures on-site on the morning of 2nd September 2021.

The discussions with the villagers also included different options for storing the materials for the restoration and the potential rent of the new 'hotel' building built by the villagers underneath the temple. These discussions are still ongoing.

Further Works

During the return to Kathmandu in early September the date for the inauguration of the project with members of the US Embassy was set to October 1. Kunjon Thakuri also applied with the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, for permission for the planned restoration work. It turned out that its Director General, Damodar Gautam, planned to visit the region later that month and Kunjon requested him also to visit Lo Gekhar. Kunjon also had the poster informing about the project reprinted to correct issues with the Nepali text.

Kunjon then returned to Mustang to facilitate the visit of the Director General and to prepare the inauguration with other members of the Norbusum board. Thus, much of the last week of the month was spent with further discussion about the project and heritage preservation in the region more broadly. The Director General visited the site on September 28, and the day after the delegation of the US embassy arrived in lower Mustang for visits to Jhong/Dzong and Gönpa Gang.

In the meantime, Christian Luczanits sorted this year's documentation and made it available to the Norbusum Foundation through the shared Google Drive.

Evaluation

With the work done in this quarter the overall planning work is completed and the preparation of the actual conservation work can begin. The discussions with the villagers were extremely useful and the agreement to create a master plan for the site is a big step forward.

Seen in a wider context, the pace at which Mustang heritage has been transformed during the last years is alarming. Lo Manthang and Tsarang, for example, have seen changes to their monasteries that demonstrate an increasing insensitivity towards architectural heritage, often replacing historical structures with concrete ones that have no regional features at all.

Lo Gekhar, too, is affected by such insensitive projects. In 2020 a poor quality wall was constructed around a core area of the complex but remained unfinished, allegedly because the funds were exhausted. Fortunately, it does not yet cross the wet grassland area that is characteristic of the site (Figure 13). Further, a new road from Drakmar to Lo Gekhar directly leads into this demarcated sacred area with vehicles having to pass by directly at the back of the temple, which also is its circumambulation path (Figure 2). Obviously, this road has already become a point of contention, as a newer road appears to have been created to bypass the temple itself, but still is planned to cross the sacred area further down the slope. The section crossing the wet grassland remained unfinished so far (Figure 13).

This summer, the left wing in front of the temple has been replaced by a modern structure in concrete (Figure 10). Not only is this structure encroaching upon the path in front of the temple, but it also is not integrated into the courtyard environment. Further, it needs to be noted that this construction was executed without any regard for the ongoing usage of the temple itself. Building materials and machines were placed directly on the access path or the circumambulation path around the temple affecting its religious usage even when no work was going on (Figure 11).



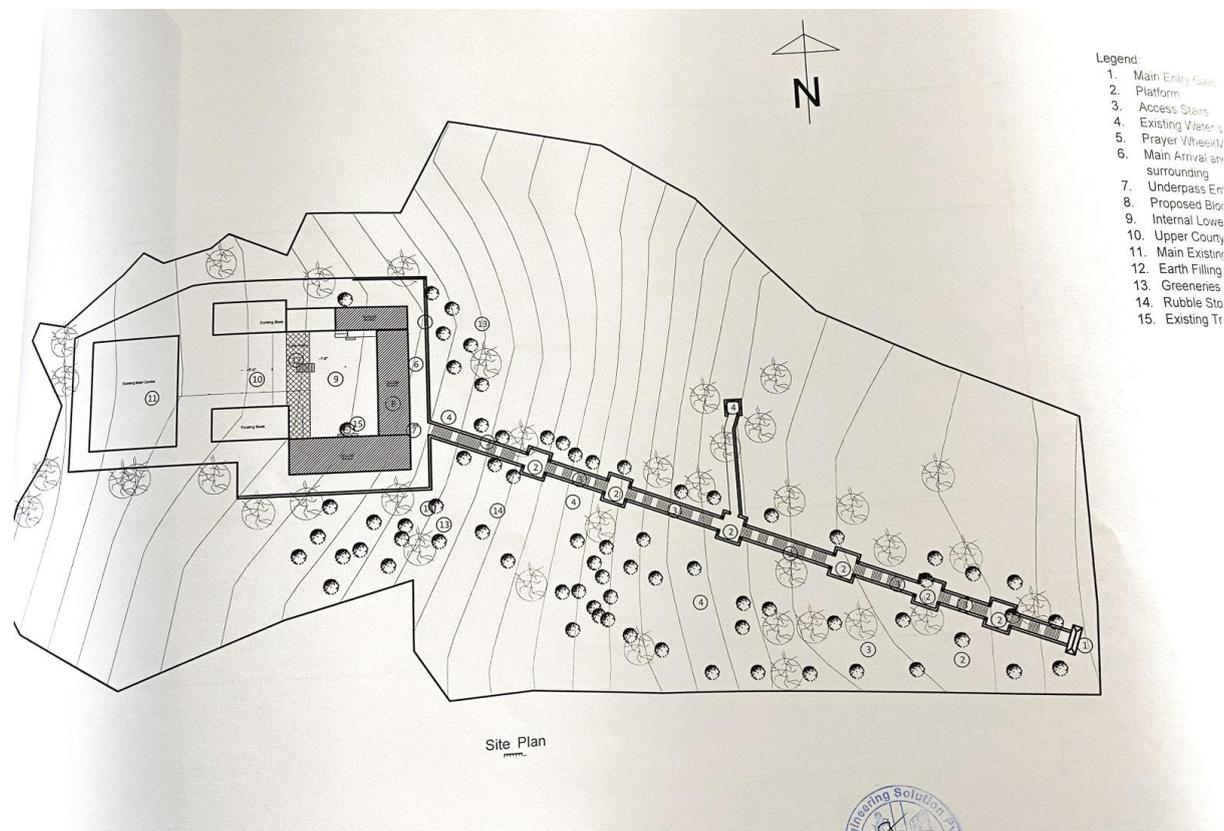
10. View of the courtyard in front of the temple with its left wing replaced by a new structure in concrete.



11. Building materials on the circumambulation path around the main temple.

During our visit, we also met potential contractors for a much larger project replacing the remaining courtyard structures, expanding them considerably, and adding a concrete staircase leading up to the monument from a parking lot further down on the same slope the monastery is located at (Figure 11). Given that the environment of the temple, including its springs, wet grasslands and trees, are an integral part of its

sacredness of the site—after all the temple was built to tame the snake deity (*klu*) of the site which is a symbolic reference to the springs—these changes directly harm the actual purpose and integrity of the site. Fortunately, the contractor did not take on this commission and this project has not yet been started.



12. Plan to replace and expand the structures in front of the temple with government funds.

The discussion at the village meeting provided some hope that this bigger project can be avoided, but this will depend on their willingness to speak up against short term economic advantages which may be promised to them. Equally, in conversations with Kunjon Thakuri the Director General of the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, has expressed his dismay with some of the works that have been done in Mustang, including the new concrete building at Lo Gekhar.

Of course, the Norbusum Foundation firmly argues against such insensitive projects, but ultimately its influence is limited. However, we feel that this makes a successful, sensitive restoration of the temple itself largely adhering to traditional means even more important.

Going Forward

The winter months will be dedicated to purchasing and transporting the necessary materials to the site. Further, a safe storage place for the materials needs to be secured and the accommodation of the workers planned. The target is to begin the actual restoration work in early April 2022.

The foundation will also work on a master plan for the site and then finalise it with the villagers of Marang. Efforts to create a larger committee with outside members, including international ones, to help to retain the integrity of the site and preserve its environment will continue.



13. View of Lo Gekhar in September 2021 demonstrating the impact of recent construction on the site at large. While the core site with its wet grassland has largely been left untouched so far, the incomplete surrounding wall and the new buildings to the right of the complex, the one in the foreground is a 'hotel' built by Marang village, have already altered the appearance of the complex. The planned larger construction (Figure 12) would lead from the temple to the level of the roads now approaching the lower part of the complex from both sides, and a parking lot would need to be placed at that height as well. An alternative suggested by the village committee would leave the complex as it is and have cars park on the northern side of the river, where a walking bridge crossing the river provides all year access.