

The paintings of the Saspol Caves in Ladakh

Believed to have dated back to the 13th-15th centuries, the Saspol Caves are located across the river Indus from Alchi, the site of one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh. The gloriously detailed Buddhist paintings in two of these five caves depict a complete iconographical cycle, of *acharyas*, protector deities and Bodhisattvas
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This page, top: Paradise of Amitabha Buddha, also known as Amitayus, the Buddha of Eternal Life, in Cave 3



This page, left: a view of north-western wall of Cave 3 with the altar in the foreground; bottom: view of the landscape of Saspol Caves from the path leading to the caves

The landscapes of Ladakh are ever-changing; with every curve of the road, a new vista is revealed. The only constant is the sheer scale – the mountains seem to touch the skies, and the undulating land seems to extend forever. And amidst these mountains lie hidden, jewels of our Buddhist heritage, mostly in the forms of fortifications and monasteries, dating back centuries.

The fortifications blend in with the varied brown shades of the mountains, while the monasteries stand a stark white against them. Inside the monasteries however, is another matter, with bright paintings – murals as well as *thangkas* – enlivening the interiors.

While this contrast is evident in the monasteries, with the walls, ceilings, and even the icons painted in vibrant colours, nowhere does this distinction stand out more, than in the caves of Saspol.^[1]

The Caves

Saspol is located across the river Indus from Alchi, the site of one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh. Local lore dates the monastery to the 10th century C.E, but historians date it to the 12th and 13th centuries.^[2] It is about 65 kilometres west of Leh, at an altitude of 10,200 ft.

Carved into the face of the mountain, the Saspol Caves appear, at first glance, to be slightly larger than pigeonholes. It is only the entrance to the main cave, whitewashed, and outlined with red ochre, that draws our attention towards them.

A rough and narrow path, marked by loose pebbles leads up to the caves. There is space for just one surefooted person to navigate the path at a time. Great care and caution is required, but the climb is worth every effort because within these caves are some of the most spectacular Buddhist paintings in Ladakh. There are five caves in all, and these have been dated to the period between 13th-15th centuries. In reality, the caves are far from the pigeonholes they appear to be, from a distance. They are airy and filled with light.

Two of the caves are painted, and it is the so-called Cave 3 where most of the paintings are still intact. It has a single entrance, yet light permeates the entire space, illuminating the corners, and no torches are needed to see even the minutest of details. It, however, does take a few moments for the eyes to adjust after entering the cave, and when they do, the paintings are revealed in all their glory.

There is also, what appears to be an altar on one side with oil-smearred lamps – the only evidence of recent worship. Otherwise, the cave is bare,



with only the paintings to talk of its erstwhile importance.

The Paintings

Every inch of the walls of Cave 3 is covered with paintings, which reflect the distinct influence of Tibetan Buddhism and art, and are thought to date to the 15th century, based on inscriptions as well as styles. They are neatly laid out in registers (sections), and according to Bellini [2014], who has done extensive work on the paintings and their significance, they depict a complete iconographical cycle, of *acharyas*, protector deities and Bodhisattvas.^[3]



This page, clockwise from top: a painting of the figure of Acharya Atiśa in Cave 3, who is credited with the second revival of Buddhism in Tibet; Sakyamuni Buddha Vajrasana in Cave 3. Seated in *vajrāsana*, it is a depiction that evokes the Buddha's defeat of the negative forces represented by Mara at Bodhgaya; Acharya Tsongkhapa in Cave 3. Founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed he lived between the 14th and 15th centuries
Opposite page: Vajrabhairava in Cave 3. Believed to be the main protector deity of the Gelugpa School, this image of could probably be the earliest such depiction of this important protector deity



The 'Acharyas' or Masters

The central figure in this cave is that of the Śākyamuni Buddha, on the north-western wall, facing the entrance. This is Vajrāsana Buddha, seated in *vajrāsana*, a depiction that evokes the Buddha's defeat of the negative forces represented by Mara at Bodhgaya.

On the right of the Buddha is a complete panel, starting with the figure of the Acharya Atiśa, who is credited with the second revival of Buddhism in Tibet^[6]. The Acharya, who was born in Bengal is said to have been invited to Tibet in the 11th century to revive Buddhism. The panel has the Acharya on the top centre, seated on a lotus. Dancing on the corollas of the lotus on either side, are two protector deities, which help identify the Acharya.

Below Atiśa are shown a triad of acharyas, identified by inscriptions as a master and his two disciples. ^[6] Below the triad is a small panel showing the consecration of a shrine (probably this very one at Saspol?). A table with ritual objects is on the right, while on the left are a group of people. It has been suggested

that this is a depiction of the 15th century ruler of Ladakh, who invited monks from Tibet to establish a monastery here. ^[6]

The north-eastern wall, too, has a depiction of an Acharya, who has been identified as Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, who lived between the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Protector Deities and Bodhisattvas

Vajrabhairava, the main protector deity of the Gelugpa School is depicted to the left of Śākyamuni Buddha, along with other protector deities such as Samvara, Guhyasamāja and Hevajra. Bellini has suggested that this image of Vajrabhairava, could probably be the earliest such depiction of this important protector deity.

The southern wall has a depiction of a eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara (a Bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of the Buddhas), flanked by two monks and surrounded by eleven medallions, which depict other monks; and below him is Usnisavijayā, the Buddha of longevity.

Next to them is an unusual depiction of the Bodhisattvas Manjuśrī (associated with insight), and Maitreya (the future Buddha), in conversation with each other. They are identified by their attributes – a book and sword for Manjushri and an ewer and three stupas for Maitreya, shown placed on lotus steles next to them. This scene refers to a vision of Acharya Atiśa, who, after reading some Buddhist texts, saw the two Bodhisattvas seated, having a conversation on the same texts, under the watchful eyes of Vajrapāni, who is depicted at a lower level on the same wall.

Painted under these two Bodhisattvas is a rare depiction of Vajraividāra, conqueror of Vajra and dispeller of negativity, in blue and flanked by birds.

The most impressive painting on this wall, however, is that of the Paradise of Amitābha Buddha, also known as Amitāyus, the Buddha of eternal life. He is shown here, seated in Sukhavati, the realm of bliss, surrounded by the eight great Bodhisattvas, as well as other Buddhas and protectors.



This page, left: a rare depiction of Vajravajāra, conqueror of Vajra and dispeller of negativity, in blue and flanked by birds, in Cave 3; bottom: a painting of the figure of Śākyamuni Buddha in Cave 2, with Dipankara by his side



This page, clockwise from right: the eleven-headed, 1000-armed Avalokiteśvara in Cave 3, flanked by two monks and eleven medallions; Bodhisattvas Manjushri (associated with insight) and Maitreya (the future Buddha) in Cave 3; Uśnīsavijayā, or the Buddha of longevity in Cave 3



The eastern section of the north-eastern wall has the depiction of the mandala of Vairocana, the primordial Buddha, and the smallest wall, the south-eastern one, has a depiction of two Vajrapānis – one fierce and one peaceful. Apart from these central figures, the paintings also depict many more Bodhisattvas, protector deities, monks as well as Mahasiddhas.

rise of the Gelugpa School of Buddhism in the region.

The spectacular cave 3 is, in essence, a small cell with an altar. It was probably the central cave, meant for worship and meditation. More than half a millennium after its creation, the cave receives enough light for the casual visitor or the worshipper to see the paintings without the aid of torches. This is probably because of the placement of the cave – its location on the mountain as well as its entrance in the south-east, bringing in a lot of light. Was this the reason why Cave 3 was chosen to house the most intricate paintings? We can only guess and will probably never know.

The simple cave and the exquisite paintings evoke images of the monks, who had left the world behind, living in these caves, with the barest of necessities, yet covering their walls with the most beautiful paintings in the most vibrant of colours, bringing in, could we say, the colours of life through their masters and gods, into their barren existence and a barren landscape as well?

Conclusion

The paintings of Saspol are important, because of their detailed iconographic cycle, which includes not only protector deities and Bodhisattvas, but also historical figures of *acharyas*. They help to not only date the caves, but also reveal the emergence and the quick



Notes and References

- ¹ I visited the Saspol Caves in August 2017. The caves are under the administration of the Likir Monastery, and conservation work has been carried out by INTACH Ladakh Chapter. The project currently comes under the aegis of the World Monuments Fund. There was no guide available on the site when I visited, and there is hardly any literature on the caves. Most of the information in this article has been gathered from Chiara Bellini's 2014 paper. [see 3]
- ² Luczanits (2005). "The early Buddhist heritage of Ladakh reconsidered" (pp.65-96). In J. Bray (Ed.), *Ladakh Histories: Local and regional Perspectives*; Leiden: Brill.
- ³ Chiara Bellini (2014). "The paintings of the caves of Sa-spo-la in Ladakh: proof of the development of the religious order of the dGe-lugs in Indian Tibet during the 15th century." (pp.315-346) In Dramdul and Francesco Sferra (Eds.) *From Mediterranean to Himalaya - A Festschrift to commemorate the 120th birthday of Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci*
- ⁴ Kamala Mukherjee (1996). "Cultural History of Ladakh, Part 1". *Bulletin of Tibetology*, No.3, pp.23-27.
- ⁵ D. Snellgrove and T. Skorupski (1980). *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh* (Volume 2): *Zanskar and the Cave Temples of Ladakh*. London: Aris & Phillips, Warminster.
- ⁶ E. Lo Bue (2007). The Gu Ru La Khang at Phyi dbang: A mid-15th century Temple in Central Ladakh. In A. Heller, G. Orofino, and C. Ramble (Eds.) *Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas. Essay on History, Literature, Archaeology and Art*; Leiden: Brill.