Next to the Markula Devi temple, the most important centre of Kasmiri style woodcarving is the Alchi chos-khor meaning religious enclave in Ladakh. The village of Alchi, situated 76 kms. from Leh, is set like a jewel amidst lofty Karakoram ranges. It is accessible from Saspol on Srinagar-Leh highway by a bridge on the Indus river. It is a large village consisting of four hamlets, the last of which is known as chos-khor. This monastic complex consists of five Buddhist temples that stand more or less in a row on a terrain that slopes down towards the Indus river. (pl. 115) These are: the dukhang, the sum-tsek, the lotsawa lhakhang, the Manjusri lhakhang and the lhakhang soma. All these structures are clustered together unevenly and surrounded by a number of small chortens, monks' houses and terraced fields all around. They are in a fairly good state of preservation. The reason for this is assigned by local tradition to the unique sanctity attached to the legend of Rinchen-bzang-po (958-1055 A.D.)¹. Here we shall confine our study to the first two temples.

The dukhang (Assembly hall)

The most prominent of these structures is the dukhang on account of its being the main temple in this monastic complex.² Architecturally, its layout is identical with that of the Buddhist temples in Tabo, Nyarma, Nako and other structures said to have been
founded by Rinchen-bzang-po. No major repairs are said to have been done over the centuries and it is said that today it stands more or less in its original condition.

We traverse a courtyard in order to reach the doorway of this structure. This courtyard is roofed over with a suspended wooden arch triangular in shape and enclosing elegantly worked foils, each containing the figure of a lion or a mythical animal (pl.116). The lion symbolises the Buddha who is worshipped by his followers as the lion of the Sakya clan. On a wooden plaque fixed between the forepaws of the lions is a wooden sculpture of a crowned Buddhist deity seated on padmasana carved in relief. The arch rests on two figures of lions projecting a little like brackets. Similarly carved figures in the round are also seen projecting from the corners of the ceiling on the front porch of the lowermost storey of the sum-Stek, the temple standing on the right side. The trefoliated arch with a triangular surround is an important architectural motif peculiar to Kashmiri temples and figures prominently both in stone temples, e.g. Martand (pl.114), Pandrethan (pl.55) Avantiswami, Payar, etc. and architectural woodcarvings from 8th to 11th centuries A.D. We have already seen it on the doorway to the Markula Devi temple. That this motif was used in both Hindu and Buddhist temples is evident. For the Hindus, the triangle and the trefoliated arches symbolised the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Visnu and Mahesa, while the Buddhists regard it as symbolising the triratna (triple jewels), i.e. the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha, which are sacred to them. In Alchi alone, there are many versions of this trefoliated arch. We see the development of a motif which is formally expressed in stone as the surround of the Buddhist figure on the base of Parihasapura
stupa and at Alchi an altogether relaxed motif which takes on a variety of geometrical shapes as we shall see on the porch of the Sum-tsek temple.

There are four wooden pillars in the centre; they are fluted and capped by square capitals that rise up in two or three successive courses and are shaped like a wedge, narrowing down to the head of the pillar near the ceiling. Similar pillars flank the image of Surya at Martand\(^6\) and also the relief panel of a male figure surrounded by female figures from the Avantiswami temple.\(^7\)

Now we are face to face with the elaborately carved doorway of the dukhang (pl.117) It is modelled after the doorways of post-Gupta temples, in that it has recessed jambs divided into vertical bands that continue over the lintels and the figural frames alternate with ornamental ones. Similarly carved doorways are to be met with not only in Tabo chos-khor, Tsaparang, Tholing, the Brom-ston and Byempai lhakhangs in Spiti, all of which are said to have been the work of Kasmiri artisans of the 10-11th centuries A.D.\(^8\), but also all over Himachal Pradesh as we have already seen in the previous chapter.\(^9\) As in the Dakhani Mahadeva temple of Nirmand(Kulu), here also the outermost frames are decorated with bands of large stylised lotus petals. The innermost frames carry the motif of interlinked vajras. The next frames are embellished with ornamental patterns composed of running creepers and foliage. Projecting from the centre of the overdoor is an arched niche (lalatabimba) enclosing the image of six-armed Buddhist god Vairocana who is enshrined within the temple. The depiction on the lalatabimba of the deity enshrined within the temple is also a tradition of Gupta temple architecture,
as we have already noticed in an earlier chapter. The god is flanked by Ratnasambhava, Aksobhya, Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi in seated postures and painted white like Vairocana. This lintel projects slightly from the doorway. The next jambs on each side portray four deities seated in arched niches, each separated by ornamental patterns composed of tendrils and foliage. The lintel corresponding to these jambs forms a kind of recessed niche between the two projecting lintels. The same arrangement is repeated on top. The human figures carved on the doorframes are those of arhatas, siddhas and mahasiddhas.

All the figural relief sculptures on this doorway are clearly in Kasmiri style, as is evident from a well-defined preference for elegant and supple postures. The contrasting combination of classical naturalism in modelling well-shaped limbs and stylistic angularity in the drawing of the garments, meticulously filled with squarish pattern is the chief characteristic of this style. These sculptures are a natural evolution from later Gupta mannerism and early mediaeval art of Kasmir and retain a perfect balance and harmony of the design as a whole. The various details of the tendrils, foliage and flowers, animals and human figures display a remarkable elaboration, fantastic wealth of ornaments, twisting yet symmetrical tendrils among which are seated slim and elegant figures of the five Buddhas. This profuse ornamentation also characterises the wall paintings embellishing the interior walls and the altars of this temple. The ornamental designs comprise symmetrically spinning and coiling tendrils and lotus stalks which form a complexity of decorative design enshrining the deities.
This 'doorway' has its counterparts in Tsaparang and Tholing temples in Tibet which are also said to have been carved by Kasmiri craftsmen and display profuse and baffling details, yet the overall impression is one of soothing and balancing rhythm. Nothing quite like it is to be met with in any of the surviving stone temples in Kasmir.

Another testimony of these carvings having been executed by Kasmiri artisans is provided by their names recorded in the Tibetan manuscripts and the biography of Rinchen-bzang-po translated by Tucci. In fact, all scholars unanimously agree that from the 8th century A.D. onwards, Ladakh had become closely integrated into the orbit of Kasmiri culture and its art forms were essentially moulded by Kasmiri style.

The sum-tsek or Three-tiered temple

The sum-tsek is a three-storeyed structure (pl.118), each tier superimposed one above the other and diminishing towards the top. Architecturally, it resembles the sat-mahal pasada of Polonnaruva in Ceylon. In Tucci's view, this temple appears to have been constructed as a counterpart to the three-tiered temple "ser-khang" at Tholing, the ancient capital of Guge, built by Kasmiri artisans at the instance of Rinchen-bzang-po. In order to gain access to the ground floor, one has to pass through a 10 ft. deep open portico. The structure on the whole appears to be well built and solid, and its front porch rises to a second storey which is supported by wooden pillars. The carved woodwork, although in a fragile state, still looks amazingly impressive and is in a good
state of preservation (pl.119). On the ground floor, we see two wooden pillars supporting the long horizontal beam separating the lower storey from the middle one. A notable feature of this portion are the wooden figures of lions projecting from the corners of the ceilings like brackets (pl.119). These beams bear a striking resemblance to those supporting the two legs of the triangular arch in the courtyard of the dukhang, which suggests that probably the same artisan executed the carvings in both the temples. The most interesting and impressive portion of the facade is the second storey where we see two sets of three columns. These columns are much shorter than the ones on the ground floor, although they have identical capital brackets ending in volutes on both the sides. Here the square pillars flank the circular ones. They are placed exactly above the columns of the lower storey and rest on double beams separating the two storeys; these beams carry ornamental designs formed by foliage and creepers. Between these two sets of pillars are placed three figures of the Buddhist deities - the Buddha/Avalokitesvara in the centre seated in the earth-touching attitude (bhumisparsa mudra); on his right is Manjusri and on the left Maitreya. The latter two have been wrongly identified as green Tara and Vajrasattva by Francke. All these wooden statuettes in sitting postures are enclosed within trefoliated arches surrounded by triangular gables. The trefoliated arches vary a great deal in design and shape. The kirtimukha carved in the round are placed at the apex of each of the triangular gables which are placed between the two horizontal beams running along the width of the facade.
Similarly carved kirtimukhas also figure on the tympanum of Nepalese temples, e.g. the Cangu-Narayana temple. On top, the rafters carry the denticular and foliated motifs. Projecting from the beam above are a number of wooden figures of lions carved in the round placed at some distance from one another. These figures remind me of similar lion figures on the plinth of Ali Masjid stupa in Khyber Pass, and of the tombs of Songtsen gampo and Repachen which are said to have been earlier in date. Identical figures are commonly seen in Nepalese wooden structures also, e.g. Harihara temple in Patan, Bhaktapura palace and Bhadgaon palace.

The roof is supported on four wooden pillars with an 8 ft. square space between them which is open to the floor, above. The 4 columns on either side of the Maitreya head have crumbled down and are propped up by two slanting columns of recent origin.

The carved beams and engaged short stub wooden columns with bases and capitals, denticular abacus cornices, etc. show the strong influence of Kasmiri architecture that reached its acme during the reign of Lalitaditya Muktapida. For example, the beam placed between the lion-end joists and the stub columns has a carved miniature arcade of the type which is found at the Parihasapura Caitya and also on the kirtimukha cornice of the Avantiswami temple. Similar pillars support the canopy structures above the images of Ratnasambhava, Aksobhya, Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi occupying the central niche of the dukhang around the central image of Vairocana.
A study of these architectural woodcarvings is significant in the history of Indian art from more than one point of view. Apart from the Markula temple, they are the only surviving specimens of Kasmiri style woodcarvings dating from 1000 A.D. This date can be fixed on the basis of the character of the script inscribed on the doorway of the dukhang. Besides, the stylistic similarity between the wall paintings embellishing the interior and the carved figural reliefs enables us to surmise that both are contemporaneous to the founding of the temples. The figural sculptures also bear a strong resemblance to Kasmiri style statues in bronze, ivory and stone dating from 8th to 19th centuries A.D., a large number of which have been brought to light over the past 50 or 60 years. They also recall the figures painted on the book-covers of Gilgit MSS dated 9th century A.D. and display a distinct predilection for a sensuous fleshiness of the bodily forms, a skilful attempt at intense, naturalistic and sensitive modelling, sensuous, treatment of pectoral muscles and abdomen, slim and tapering limbs, ovaloid faces, plump cheeks, slightly exaggerated double chin, dignified expression achieved by the marvellously rounded face and the mildly upturned corners of the lips, arched eyebrows and prominent noses.

Among other features, we have already drawn attention to the pillars and triangular gables surrounding trefoliated arches. The builders of these temples freely used motifs from the stone architecture of Kasmir. This analysis reveals that these carvings are of more than local interest. They are an important link on
account of their being the last remnants of the lost Kasmiri art of mediaeval period which was the main source of Tibetan tradition. They also enable us to reconstruct the history of luxurious mediaeval sculpture of Kasmir which has disappeared.
REFERENCES


2. ibid, p.30. The dukhang forms the primary building of any monastic complex.


6. Brown, Percy’s: “Architecture of Kashmir” in Marg, VIII, No.2, March 1955; p.47: “The trefoil arch implies a more involved tradition from a purely indigenous source. That it symbolises the Trimurti or three primary divinities has been advanced.”

7. See Marg, op. cit., fig.7 on page 69.


9. See Chapter 4 of this thesis, p. 91.

10. See Chapter 4 of this thesis, p. 117.


15. Coomaraswami, Ananda K.: Early Indian Architecture: Palaces; Delhi, 1975; pl. 33.


18. Tucci, Giuseppe: The Ancient Civilisation; op. cit. pl.47.

   Also Tucci, Giuseppe: Rati-Lila; Geneva 1969; plate no. not mentioned

20. Deo, S.B.: op. cit. pl. XV, 2

21. ibid, pl. XVII, 2.
22. Snellgrove and Skorupski, *op. cit.* p. 15, and also p. xii.

23. The same observation has been made by Tucci in his article entitled "Indian Paintings in Western Tibetan Temples" in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 8, 1937; p. 130.


Pal, P.: *The Bronzes of Kashmir*, 1975; pls. 28(a) and (b).


Dwivedi, V.P.: *Indian Ivories*, Delhi, 1972; pls. 74, 76 and 77.