

The Ultimate Conqueror in the Tabo Main Temple

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Abstract: This short essay proposes an identification for a group of five deities represented on the entry wall of the Tabo Main Temple that has remained unexplained. The fragmentary depiction dates to the renovation of the temple finished in 1042 CE under the auspices of the Purang-Guge royal house. A comparison to other representations of a five-deity mandala in Dunkar and Phyang, West Tibet, and a survey of relevant textual sources indicate that the configuration at Tabo represents a Vajravidāraṇa mandala assembly. The proposed identification is of wider relevance for an evaluation of Buddhism in the Western Himalayas at the time and the development of Tibetan Buddhism more broadly.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Early Western Himalayan Art, Tabo Monastery, West Tibet, Vajravidāraṇa

The Tabo Main Temple, originally established in 996 CE, is most remarkable for preserving almost its entire iconographic program from the renovation finished in 1042. Of course, its sculptures and paintings have suffered over time, but there is enough preserved that almost all of its content can be reconstructed, offering a unique glimpse into early Tibetan Buddhism as it was promoted by the ruling elite at the time. As is well known, the West Tibetan royal house had a rather conservative attitude towards Buddhism and directly interfered in the matter of what was to be practiced and what was not. For this reason, the highest Buddhist tantric teachings known at the time were acknowledged and hinted at but rarely depicted.

In recent years, I succeeded in identifying one such hint towards the highest yoga tantras in the iconographic program of the assembly hall of the Tabo Main Temple. A close analysis of the groups of deities depicted between and above the clay sculptures of the Vajradhātu mandala revealed that most of these are part of a complete assembly of the Dharmadhātu mandala (fully the Dharmadhātu-vāgīśvara-mañjuśrī-maṇḍala). Thereby the deities that are shared between these two mandalas are only depicted once through the sculptures of the Vajradhātu mandala. The existence of the core deities of the Dharmadhātu

mandala on the west wall of the assembly hall was well known, but not that it actually represents a second less obvious main theme of the temple as a whole. The identification of the deities of the Dharmadhātu mandala accounts for almost all previously unidentified depictions in the assembly hall. The prominent incorporation of this mandala at Tabo and later western Himalayan monuments can best be explained by its inclusion of concepts deriving from Guhyasamāja Tantra into a Yoga Tantra mandala.

But one group of five wrathful deities on the entry wall of the assembly hall remained unidentified, partially because of its poor state of preservation. This tribute to Paul Harrison will propose an identification for this depiction, the broader relations of which provide a new perspective on Buddhism in the context of the early West Tibetan kingdom.

Fragmentary Assemblies

The group of five wrathful deities in question is found above the clay sculptures on the north side of the east wall just to the side of the entrance. While the uppermost paintings on the west wall are dedicated to the main subjects, including the central deities of the Dharmadhātu mandala, the east, or entry, wall features predominately protective themes, among them deities of the outer palace of the Dharmadhātu mandala and the protectors of the three families (*rigs gsum mgon po*). The deities in question, thus, are most likely also protective in nature, and their location to the side of the entrance is intentionally chosen. Indeed, the complex nature of the integration of the Dharmadhātu mandala within the assembly hall makes clear that the decoration of the entire room was carefully planned.

The five deities are separated from those of the neighbouring subjects by painted pillars with cloth hangings, and within those their horseshoe-shaped aureoles can clearly be distinguished (Figure 1). Unfortunately, three of the five deities, including the large main image, have suffered considerably from water intrusions and crude repairs. Of the central deity, we only learn that it was green, and that its left hand is held in a vajra fist at the hip. The right hand probably is in front of the body and the deity does not trample on anything. The stance of the secondary deities is adjusted on both sides so that the stretched leg is directed towards the main deity. Of those to the left of the main image only their colours can be deduced, blue for the upper one and probably

red for the lower one. The deities to the right are well-preserved and give the viewer a sense of the quality of the paintings. Here, the upper deity is green and brandishes a vajra in the right hand raised to the side of the head, while the left hand performs the gesture of threatening (*tarjanīmudrā*) in front of the chest (Figure 2). The lower deity is identical to the upper, but it is dark blue and holds a club in the raised right hand (Figure 3).

Now, the vajra and club are probably the least distinctive attributes one can have in such a case, and there is no way that this assembly can be identified by searching through textual sources on that basis. Green for the main image is not common, so there is some potential that visual comparisons may be of help. However, similar configurations of five wrathful deities are extremely few as the topic depicted appears to have fallen out of use.

Only recently, it occurred to me that a rudimentary mandala depiction preserved in the Guhyasamāja Cave at Dunkar in West Tibet (Figure 4) may well be related to the Tabo depiction. This mandala is found in the bottom left corner of the entry wall, just above the first scenes of the Buddha's life. It consists of a vajra-encircled wheel of knife blades occupied by five wrathful deities, the central one of which is bright green (Figure 5). Here, all deities stand with their left leg outstretched (*pratyāliḍha*). The colour scheme of the surrounding deities is not an obvious match to that of Tabo, but at least this one has the potential to be identified. More importantly, here, the central deity preserves a clue to the identity of the main deity, the fragmentary remains of a crossed vajra (*viśvavajra*) held in front of the chest. This indicates that the main deity is some form of Vajravīdāraṇa (Dorjé Namjom, *rdo rje rnam 'joms*), who is either considered to have emerged from the wisdom of Vajrapāṇi or another form of him.

A third closely related mandala is in what I now call the Lotus Family Cave in Phyang (Figure 6). It is found to the left of the cave entrance and the central seated deity is almost as abraded as the one at Tabo. Here the secondary deities are represented in the intermediate directions and, as at Tabo, their stances are directed towards the main deity. The respective direction the deities are placed in relation to the main image differs from that of the previous examples, but their colours are very similar to those of the Dunkar mandala.

Considering Vajravidāraṇa

The deity Vajravidāraṇa is not very prominent in Tibetan Buddhist art, but there are a number of excellent artworks dating from the mid-13th to the 16th centuries that focus on this deity. These, along with a considerable number of texts dedicated to this deity in the Tibetan canon, indicate that Vajravidāraṇa still played an important role during this period, but also that the green form of the deity is commonly represented as semi-wrathful and seated. In the Tibetan classifications, the ritual practice (*sādhana*) of the deity counts among the lowest tantras, the Kṛīya Tantra. In mandalas dedicated to Vajravidāraṇa, the deity is semi-wrathful or wrathful, but all the examples included in the Collection of All Tantras (*rgyud sde kun btus*) with a wrathful deity in the centre are much more elaborate and the main deity is either blue or black. A green main deity surrounded by four secondary ones occupies the Vajravidāraṇa mandala of Mitrayogin (no. 13), but here too, additional deities complement the twenty-three-deity mandala assembly. Thus, the common representations of the deity and its mandala in the Tibetan context do not fit the examples from Tabo, Dunkar and Phyang. Standard iconographic sources in Sanskrit are even less useful, as there the deity does not even occur.

Vajravidāraṇa is the personification of a well-known *dhāraṇī* bearing its name, which has quite recently been translated for practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. There, the practice of the *dhāraṇī* is qualified as ‘known for its healing and purifying effect’, and both canonical and Nyingma school ritual texts and commentaries are mentioned as sources. Thus, if there is a solution to the depictions described above, it is to be found within those texts. However, the sheer number of potentially relevant sources is a challenge in itself, and going through all of them was not possible in the context of this short study. But, within those texts, the descriptions of a certain group of secondary deities stands out as a particularly good match for the figures depicted in the paintings mentioned above.

The so-called *Vajravidāra-nāma-dhāraṇī-vyākhyāna-vajrāloka* (*rdo rje rnam par 'joms pa zhes bya ba'i gzungs kyi rnam par bshad pa rdo rje sgron ma*, T2679) only describes five deities; their sequence and iconographic details conforms well—but far from perfectly—to the depictions at hand. In the centre is Vajravidāraṇa, who is here called the ‘essence body Vajrapāṇi’ (*bdag nyid kyi lus*). He is described as blue-green, beautiful but frowning and with orange hair. He

holds a vajra to the heart and the left hand is supported at the hip (*bkur brten pa*; 164A–B).

The four surrounding deities are placed in the intermediate directions. Accordingly, in the northeast is Vajracāṇḍa (Dorjé Tumpo, *rdo rje gtum po*), who is dark brown and holds a single pronged vajra in the right hand, while the left is held in the gesture of threatening (*tarjanīmudrā*) at the heart. In the southeast is Vajrakīlaya (Dorjé Purpa, *rdo rje phur pa*), who is dark green and brandishes a single pronged vajra in the right hand. Vajradāṇḍa (Dorjé Béchön, *rdo rje be con*) in the southwest is blue-black and holds a club (*yamadaṇḍa*) in his right hand. Vajramusala (Dorjé Towa, *rdo rje tho ba*) in the northwest is black and holds a vajra hammer (164B–165A).

If we compare this arrangement with the depictions mentioned above, the one in Phyang fits best. Vajravidāraṇa was seated and probably only semi-wrathful in this case, and the three preserved images of Vajracāṇḍa, Vajradāṇḍa and Vajramusala conform to the description in iconography. But Vajracāṇḍa is placed in the southeast and the positions of all others shift clockwise by one position. The mandala in the Dunkar cave also conforms well, with Vajracāṇḍa now in the north and the hammer of Vajramusala not painted. These depictions dating to the late 12th and early 13th centuries—given their relative variability—provide a good framework for identifying the constellation at Tabo. Here the two preserved deities must represent Vajrakīlaya and Vajradāṇḍa, the remaining traces roughly conforming to the colours of the other two deities. Thus, here the secondary deities were arranged from the bottom left deity clockwise.

While the text only describes the five main deities, it later refers to additional auspicious goddesses (*bkra shis kyi lha mo*) and guardians (*'jig rten skyong ba*; 172A–B). The former group indicates that the presence of the eight auspicious symbols around the mandala at Phyang has some textual basis, and personifications of these symbols are also part of other versions of a Vajra-vidāraṇa mandala. In my survey of relevant texts, I have also seen them interpreted as the eight offering goddesses. The latter group may well refer to the ten wrathful deities that occur in most versions of the mandala and are often listed in textual sources. The version of Mitrāyogin includes both the personifications of the symbols and the ten wrathful deities.

Intriguing Relations

When examined in light of one another, these early temple depictions and the textual traditions interpreting the Vajravīdāraṇa *dhāraṇī* prove that the deity associated with this ritual utterance was of prime importance during the later spread of Buddhism in the western Himalayas. It is also clear that Vajravīdāraṇa was generally perceived to be more powerful than in later times. The depictions also demonstrate that a core of five deities within a vajra circle was considered enough to represent his mandala. At Tabo, the assembly of this core mandala was important enough to be the only protective theme placed within the assembly hall.

The textual sources deriving from the Vajravīdāraṇa *dhāraṇī* are extremely varied; the iconographic details found therein point toward a complex history. This complexity is reflected by the variations among the three early Western Himalayan depictions, which are unlikely to be linked to the same source even though there is a relatively close relationship between them. The rudimentary nature of the depictions differs considerably from the details found within most textual sources surveyed, which describe a mandala proper, including a palace and additional deities. How exactly the different sources relate to each other and lead to the later Tibetan variants would be a study in itself.

Given the Tabo depiction, it is remarkable that no trace of Vajravīdāraṇa appears to be preserved among the texts and images from Dunhuang. And we have already noticed that the deity is absent in Sanskrit sources as well. These absences are intriguing and hint that the practice of Vajravīdāraṇa may well derive from the wider Himalayan region. From where in the Himalayas is another question that would warrant more detailed research on the textual sources.

Given these circumstances, it appears less surprising that the text I used above as my primary comparative source (T2679) describes only a rudimentary mandala and is attributed to a certain Padma Chungné (*slob dpon chen po pad+ma 'byung gnas*), that is Padmasambhava. Obviously then, here, a teaching that in the conservative eyes of the Purang-Guge ruling house may well have been problematic has found acceptance in what can justly be called a state temple, founded in 996 by Yeshe Ö (*ye shes 'od*) and restored before 1042 by Jangchub Ö (*byang chub 'od*), prominent members of the royal house actively involved in sanitising the Buddhism practiced at the time. Although the ordinances of Yeshe Ö and Zhiwa Ö (*zhi ba 'od*), a younger brother of Jangchub Ö,

do mention numerous teachings associated with Padmasambhava, such as Dzogchen and the Kīlaya Tantras, as spurious, Padmasambhava is not mentioned in person, and neither is Vajravīdāraṇa.

This indicates that in contrast to these other teachings, the practice of Vajravīdāraṇa was not considered controversial. To express it in a positive way, the primary skill of this deity in conquering opposing forces was considered so valuable that it was included into Tabo's pantheon. This function fully aligns with the primary activity Padmasambhava is associated with in the earliest Tibetan sources that mention him. In this regard, the Purang-Guge kingdom simply continues an imperial tradition, as it does in so many other ways, which following its demise appears to become obsolete.

Figures



Figure 1: Severely damaged group of a five deity Vajravīdāraṇa mandala assembly on the east wall of the Tabo Main Temple's assembly hall; photo Jaroslav Poncar 1984.



Figure 2: The green Vajrakīlī brandishing a vajra and performing gesture of threatening (*tarjanīmudrā*); photo C. Luczanits 1991 (20,11a), WHAV.



Figure 3: The dark blue Vajradanḍa brandishing a club and performing gesture of threatening (*tarjanīmudrā*); photo C. Luczanits 1993 (18,5), WHAV.



Figure 4: Right side of the entry wall of the Guhyasamāja cave at Dunkar with mandalas dedicated to Avalokiteśvara and Vajravidāraṇa; photo Jaroslav Poncar 1993 (8,16A), WHAV.



Figure 5: Detail of the Vajravīdāraṇa mandala in Figure 4; photo Christiane Kalantari 2007 (2204).



Figure 6: Vajravīdāraṇa mandala on the entry wall of the Lotus Family Cave at Phyang, where it is represented to the left of the entrance; photo C. Luczanits 2007 (0612).

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Signet: Ein Mönch, durch Abhirati wandernd (Foto: Christian Luczanits)

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