

## No 30

### Densatil Monastery

Pakmodru, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China), founded 1158

## The Commemorative Stupas of the Lang/Pakmodrupa Dynasty

JEAN-LUC ESTOURNEL

**T**HE STUDY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS of Tibetan art has made it possible to identify a group of objects of uncommon quality, often of larger than normal sizes, and above all presenting superb gilding and very rich inclusions of semi-precious stones. It is only since the 1990s that, by comparing such objects with photographs taken in 1948 by P. F. Mele, they could be identified as elements of the large commemorative stupas (height approximately sixteen feet, or five meters) built at the Densatil Monastery between 1267 and 1435.

### Densatil Monastery

Densatil Monastery developed from 1198 onward around the hut that the monk Dorje Gyelpo built in 1158 at a place called Pakmodru overlooking the Yarlung Tsangpo River, in the present Neudong district. Its fame rests on the eighteen stupas erected between 1170 and 1570, housing the relics of a long lineage of abbots of the Lang/Pakmodrupa dynasty, and mainly on the eight great, elaborately ornamented ones partially visible in the photographs taken in 1948 by Mele. These eight very specific monuments are undoubtedly among the most complex and precious ever built in Tibet.

### A Brief History of the Eight Monumental Stupas of Densatil

The first of the eighteen stupas once at Densatil was cast in 1170 to house the heart of Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo (1110–1170), which remained intact after cremation, together with other relics. This stupa was called Tashi Wobar, or “Radiating Light of Auspiciousness.”<sup>1</sup> It was a huge *mahaparinirvana*-type stupa associated with the Buddha’s passing, created in the Kadampa style, as was common practice at the time.<sup>2</sup> In the years following the construction of the monastery, the Tashi Wobar lay at the heart of an incredible political and artistic adventure due to Jikten Gonpo (1143–1217), who served as second abbot of Densatil from 1177 to 1179 before leaving for his own monastery in Drigung.

After the construction of the main hall of Densatil in 1198, Jikten Gonpo went to meditate at Gampo in the Dakpo area and there had a vision of the “pure crystal mountain” of Tsari with the deity Chakrasamvara in his palace, the whole surrounded by twenty-eight hundred deities, organized as a monumental “Stupa of Many Auspicious Doors,” or *tashi gomang*-type stupa.

On his return to Drigung, in order to pay homage to his master, he undertook to build the multi-chapel monument he had visualized to serve as a pedestal for the Tashi Wobar stupa of Pakmodrupa, which he brought to Drigung from Densatil. The construction work on this monument, organized in six levels supporting hundreds of deities in gilt copper alloy and precious materials on all its faces, seems to have lasted ten years, until 1208.<sup>3</sup>

This particular type of tashi gomang stupa, which must be considered as the “Reliquary Stupa of Many Auspicious Doors for Pakmodrupa,” would then be reproduced to commemorate selected deceased abbots of Drigung and Densatil, since they were the holders of the direct lineage of the master.

To sum up, the tashi gomang stupa model created by Jikten Gonpo must be considered, as Christian Luczanits phrased it in an essay title, a “mandala of mandalas,” a veritable tangle of universes of deities (twenty-eight hundred in total);<sup>4</sup> Luczanits in turn was referring to Giuseppe Tucci’s description during his visit to Densatil in 1948: “The whole Olympus of Mahayana seemed to have been assembled on those monuments.”<sup>5</sup>



For more about this deity and his palace, see Chakrasamvara Mandala with Newar Donors, no. 29.

For more about this stupa type, see Portable Shrine, no. 88; and Gyantse Kumbum, no. 55.

Parnashavari; Tibet; ca. 1370; metal, precious stones; 12½ × 11½ × 8 in. (31.8 × 29.2 × 20.3 cm); private collection (HAR 32081); image after Czaja and Proser 2014, 121



Pietro Francesco Mele (Italian, born ca. 1924); Detail of Second Tashi Gomang; Densatil Monastery, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); erected from 1360 for Drakpa Gyeltsen; gelatin silver print, 1948; Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich; VMZ-402-00-0513; photograph courtesy Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich

The fact that Jikten Gonpo chose to build this memorial stupa to his master in his own monastery rather than in Densatil, which would have been its logical location, is historically interesting. Indeed, it may suggest that the abbot of Drigung attempted to shift the power of Densatil's spiritual center from its abandoned location to his own monastery, to gain political advantage over other powerful contemporary Buddhist traditions. It seems that from the outset, the tashi gomang stupas of Drigung (totally destroyed during the repression of the Drigung revolt against the Sakya/Mongol rule in 1290) and then Densatil were created with political aims in addition to a sacred function, which explains their unusual magnificence.

The departure of the Tashi Wobar stupa from Densatil having caused troubles among the local population, Jikten Gonpo judged it preferable to return it there in 1208, with Drakpa Jungne (1175–1255), one of his main disciples, as the new abbot. A member of the powerful Lang family, he took care in 1235 to place his brother Drakpa Tsonдру (1203–1267) on the throne of Densatil before returning to Drigung to become the new abbot, thus initiating a shift of dependence, which took Densatil from the tutelage of Drigung to that of his clan.

The extent of Drakpa Tsonдру's fame brought him many offerings from as far away as the Khasa Malla kingdom of western Nepal and Ceylon. The decision by the Lang clan to erect the first tashi gomang stupa in Densatil, on the model of the ones in Drigung to honor the memory of Drakpa Tsonдру after his death, took place at a key moment in the history of the Lang/Pakmodrupa clan.

With the definitive seizure of power over Tibet by the Sakya tradition through the nomination of Pakpa (1234–1280) by Qubilai (Khublai) Khan as the ruler of Tibet, the Sakya administration divided the territory into thirteen myriarchies, one of which fell to the Lang, already strong with the prestige of their monastery of Densatil. The Mongolian takeover of Tibet then placed Densatil and the surrounding area under the protection of Hülegü (1217–1265), grandson of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan and founder, in 1256, of the Mongol Il–Khan dynasty in the Middle East, who is said to have made important offerings to the monastery.<sup>6</sup> It is conceivable that at the time the Lang clan was in a prosperous financial position to decide to undertake this exceptional construction in order to affirm the greatness of its temporal and spiritual power over his myriarchy and beyond.

The second tashi gomang stupa was built in 1360 for Drakpa Gyeltsen (1293–1360), the eighth abbot of the monastery from 1310 to 1360. All sources unanimously confirm that his brother Jangchub Gyeltsen (1302–1364), who succeeded in taking temporal power over the country from the Sakyapas, had a commemorative tashi gomang stupa erected for Drakpa Gyeltsen. Given that the Lang/Pakmodrupa clan now reigned over Tibet, Jangchub Gyeltsen, as head of one of the most prestigious and richest monasteries, had no choice but to revive this prestigious tradition to affirm the power of his family.

Six more tashi gomang stupas were built for the next six abbots, in 1370, 1386, 1407, 1408, 1431–1432, and 1434. While remaining at very high levels of quality, the works from the Densatil tashi gomang stupas are a perfect reflection of the political rise and fall of the Lang/Pakmodrupa dynasty. From 1360 to 1408, the sculptures are decorated with rich inlays of semi-precious stones, following a typology that characterizes the style of Densatil and therefore of the Lang/Pakmodrupa dynasty.

#### Description of a "Reliquary Stupa of Many Auspicious Doors for Pakmodrupa"

The analysis of the tashi gomang stupas of Densatil allows us to note that if the general iconographic plan globally remained the same over time, variations exist. The numbers of divinities indicated by the



Virupaksa, the guardian of the West, one of the Four Guardian Kings of the universe; Tibet; 15th century; copper gold and semiprecious stones (lost wax method); 28 × 17 in. (71 × 43 cm); Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Paris (HAR 32070); photograph by Thierry Ollivier © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

—Tier 4 presents in the center of each side a Buddha surrounded by two of the eight bodhisattvas of the Bhadrakalpa and two wrathful deities on each side. They are surrounded on each side by 250 representations of the Tathagata of their respective directions. A *dvarapala* (gate guardian) is arranged at each of the four corners.

—Tier 5 is dedicated to goddesses. On each side are three central goddesses flanked by the group of the sixteen goddesses of sensual enjoyment bearing offerings. The four main goddesses occupying the center of each side are Parnashavari in the east, Eight-Armed Tara in the south, Dhvajagrakeyura in the west, and Vasudhara in the north.

—Tier 6 is the lowest level. On each face, on either side of a central lotus stem, we find an aspect of Mahakala and one of the goddess Lhamo, themselves flanked by two deities of wealth and two *nagarajas* closing the section. They are all arranged in the foliage of scrolls supporting the lotus flower from which the rest of the monument seems to emerge.

At the front of the monument were placed the four Guardian Kings of Space (*lokapalas*).

#### Further Reading

Czaja, Olaf. 2014. *Medieval Rule in Tibet: The Rlangs Clan and the Political and Religious History of the Ruling House of Phag mo gru pa*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.

Czaja, Olaf, and Adriana G. Proser. 2014. *Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery*. Exhibition catalog. New York: Asia Society.

Estournel, Jean-Luc. 2020. "About the 18 Stupas and Other Treasures Once at the Densatil Monastery." <https://www.asi-art.com/articles/densatil/index.html>

#### Notes

- 1 Roerich 1976, 563.
- 2 See examples at Himalayan Art Resources, such as <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/8377>, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/50255>, and <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/64904>.
- 3 Czaja 2014, 380, 381.
- 4 Luczanits 2010, 281–310.
- 5 Tucci 1956, 128.
- 6 See Sperling 1990, 145–57.

For more about the Khasa Malla kingdom, see Queen Dipamala as the Goddess Prajnaparamita, no. 49.

On the Pakpa-Qubilai alliance and Sakya-Mongol rule, see Mahakala Stone Sculpture, no. 39; White Stupa, no. 40; Mongol Messenger's Badge, no. 42; Juyong Guan Stupa Gate, no.48.