



Northwest view of the sacred compound of Tabo in Spiti/Northern India, based on the survey work in 2002-2004. ©Carmen Auer/TU Graz 2024

# TABO MONASTERY - THE SACRED COMPOUND

Research Project by the Institute of Architectural Theory, History of Art and Cultural Studies \_ Graz University of Technology \_ Founded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF

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Southern view of the main temple complex of Tabo in Spiti/Northern India, based on the survey work in 2002-2004. © Carmen Auer/TU Graz 2024



Longitudinal section of the main temple complex of Tabo in Spiti/Northern India, based on the survey work in 2002-2004. © Carmen Auer/TU Graz 2024

# TABO MONASTERY - THE MAIN TEMPLE COMPLEX

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## THE SACRED COMPOUND (Tib. *chos-'khor*)

- 1 THE MAIN TEMPLE / VIHARA (Tib. *gTsug-lag-khang*)
- 2 THE NEW ENTRY HALL / TEMPLE OF THE MASTER (Tib. *rje-bla-ma lha-khang*)
- 3 THE PROTECTOR CHAPEL / TEMPLE OF THE TUTELARY DEITY (Tib. *mGon-khang*)
- 4 THE LARGE 'BROM-STON TEMPLE (Tib. *Brom-ston lha-khang chen-po*)
- 5 THE GOLDEN TEMPLE (Tib. *gSer lha-Khang*)
- 6 THE MANDALA TEMPLE (Tib. *dKyil-khang*)
- 7 THE WHITE TEMPLE / THE NUN'S TEMPLE (Tib. *dKar-'byung lha-khang*)
- 8 THE SMALL 'BROM-STON TEMPLE (Tib. *Brom-ston lha-khang chun-ba*)
- 9 THE MAITREYA TEMPLE (Tib. *Byams-pa'l lha-khang*)

**Fig. 01** Above: The A-A section of the sacred compound of Tabo shows the height development of the individual buildings as well as the different floor levels in the interior and exterior, based on the survey work in 2002-2004. © Neuwirth & Auer, TU Graz 2024.

**Fig. 01** Below: The site plan shows the orientation, spatial distribution and organization of the nine temples as well as the 23 chörten, which are part of the chos-'khor, based on the survey work in 2002-2004. © Neuwirth & Auer, TU Graz 2024.

The sacred compound (Tib. *chos-'khor*) of Tabo comprises nine temples and 23 chörten, four of which are said to have paintings inside. Out of the temples within the sacred compound, the Tabo Main Temple is attributable to the earliest period of Buddhism in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, while the other temples date from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as they are preserved today. The unevenly rectangular area of this compound extends over a length of up to 103 metres along the east-west running wall and a width of up to 87 metres along the north-south running wall, covering an area of 6915 square metres. It is completely enclosed by a wall that consists of a stone base and a top made of rammed earth, which reaches a height of up to 2.20 metres (lowest point is 1.80 metres).

One enters the chos-'khor through a narrow gate on the east side of the monastery wall. The largest building complex of the monastery is situated opposite this portal, 9.20 metres away. The complex consists of the Main Temple (1) with its extensions on the east side and the Large 'Brom-ston Temple (4) on the south side. The two-storey building on the east side of the Main Temple consists of the New Entry Hall (2), the Protector Chapel (3) and the abandoned monastery kitchen on the ground floor, as well as the former abbots' residence and annexes on the upper floor. Today, the entrance to the Main Temple leads from the roofed intermediate area to the Large 'Brom-ston Temple on the south side of the Main Temple in the New Entry Hall (2).

South of the Main Temple Complex, which is less than 2.00 metres away from the Large 'Brom-ston Temple by a staircase, and 14.30 metres further to the west, lies the Golden Temple (5). It is only 3.00 metres away from the south wall of the chos-'khor. A path along this wall leads to the west side of the area. The Mandala Temple (6) is located 5.00 metres behind the Large 'Brom-ston, on its west side. In the base zone of its vestibule wall, the Mandala Temple immediately adjoins the northwest corner of the Golden Temple. Thereby, a small forecourt is formed that can be reached via the stairs between the Large 'Brom-ston and the Golden Temple. On the west side of this forecourt, there is a 1.75-metre-wide open area that forms the passage between the Main Temple and the Mandala Temple.

The White Temple (7) is located 32 metres away from the Main Temple and is directly integrated into the west wall of the chos-'khor. The height difference on the west side between the ground level inside and outside of the enclosure wall measures 2.13 metres.

Two more free-standing temples are found about 30 metres away from the east enclosure wall on the north side of the Main Temple Complex. The Small 'Brom-ston Temple (8) is located directly next to the north part of the wall, and the base of the northwest corner is only 0.40 metre away. South of the Small 'Brom-ston Temple lies the Maitreya Temple, whose base on the west side is only 0.90 metre away from the Small 'Brom-ston. The distance between the Maitreya Temple and the Main Temple Complex next to the Protector Chapel is 5.50 metres.

Although the sizes of the temples differ – the interiors vary between 24 square metres in the Small 'Brom-ston Temple and 180 square metres in the Main Temple – their orientations and alignments are very similar. The main axes are oriented east-west, and the entrances and vestibules of all temples open to the east. The Main Temple also follows this orientation, but the New Entry Hall in front of it is entered from the south side. While the longitudinal axis of the Main Temple corresponds to the east-west direction, with a deviation of only 3° clockwise, the longitudinal axes of the other temples deviate between 11° clockwise and 5° counter-clockwise.

In addition to the nine temples, the chos-'khor contains 23 chörten of varying shape and conservation status, most of which are located in the northeast quarter. Some are small with a side length of 1.50 metres, while others are dominant, such as the chörten in the southwest corner of the area with a side length of 7.40 metres and a height of 7.74 metres. A further chörten with a side length of 3.40 metres is located outside the enclosure wall, next to the entrance portal to the monastery, and a smaller group of four chörten is located on the southwest side of the outer ambulatory (see also page 293). Furthermore, a lamp house is found on the east side of the monastery, which is located northward beyond the entrance to the chos-'khor.

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