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## ILLUSTRATIONS DEPICTING THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THE MYTHICAL CITY OF TIBETAN MEDICINE<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The first chapter of the most famous treatise in Tibetan medicine called *Four Treatises* (Rgyud bzhi) characterises the environmental preconditions in order to practice medicine in a perfect way. One of these aspects is the description of the mythical city called Lta na sdug where a precious palace of the Buddha of medicine is situated. The origin of the text passage and, hence, the geographical location of this mythical city is discussed controversially in the current literature. This paper, however, argues that it is possible that the suggested principles are applicable at any suitable place of Tibetan medical practice if they were adapted to the local environment as long as most of the described parameters are adhered to symbolically. Different types of visual expressions depicting features of the city as described in this introductory chapter will be compared. First, plate number one of the famous seventeenth century thangka collection to the *Blue Beryl* commentary stored in Ulan-Ude presents a rather orthodox interpretation of these circumstances. Second, not a painting but a three-dimensional example of monastic cityplanning: the medical murals in the inner courtyard of the Medical Faculty and the architectural arrangement of the Faculty within the whole cloister indicate that the local authorities may have regarded Labrang territory as a material form of Lta na sdug. Third, yet another pair of murals in a small monastery painted by the same artist as the murals at Labrang monastery present an alternative, vivid way of depiction.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Medical Paintings, Materia Medica, Lta na sdug, Labrang Monastery, powerful animals.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a result of my research project (P22965-G21), supported by the Austrian Science Fund, which analysed the history of the murals at Labrang Monastery and their differences to the thangka collection to the *Blue Beryl*. Different aspects of this project have been published [Sabernig, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014].

## 1. Introduction

The mythical city of Tibetan Medicine called Lta na sdug (Beautiful to Behold) is a legendary place described in the introductory chapter of the most important treatise of Tibetan medicine: the *Four Treatises* or *Rgyud bzhi*. The first chapter of this text constitutes its Buddhist frame story, which characterises the environmental preconditions of practising medicine in the perfect manner in terms of place, teacher, time audience and teaching (e. g., [Parfionovitch et al., 1992, p. 17; Clark, 1997, p. 27–30; Gyatso, 2015, p. 149]). As Yang ga has already noted, the origin of the Buddhist frame story is not clear, as it is not included in any of the “pre *Aṣṭāṅga* medical works and *Aṣṭāṅga-hṛdaya-saṃhitā* texts considered to be major sources of the *Four Treatises*” [Yang ga, 2010, p. 153]. Independently of the debate on the origin of the myth, it plays an important role in Tibetan medical culture. This paper, however, compares three different types of visual representations or materialisation, each of which depicts major aspects of the right place, namely Lta na sdug from a different perspective. After a short introduction of these three forms of visual media, the “location” of this mythical place will be discussed. The main part examines and compares the respective details.

Firstly, I will use plate number one of the elaborated thangka set which accompanies the *Vaidūrya sngon po* or *Blue Beryl* commentary. It is stored in Ulan-Ude and is regarded worldwide as an extraordinary treasure of medical art. No earlier depictions of Lta na sdug other than this thangka set are available. At least three almost identical versions of this set exist but their precise origin and age remains unclear so far. The original version was commissioned in the seventeenth century by Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho (1653–1705) who was regent to the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and who supported the development of Tibetan medicine in a significant way. In this period, also called the “golden century” of Tibetan medicine [Meyer, 2003, p. 99], medical achievements were painted elaborately, and at another level the state became “medicalized” [Gyatso, 2015, p. 23ff]. Medicine became a symbol for a well-functioning state.

Secondly, Labrang Monastery, its Medical faculty and the murals in the courtyard of the Medical Faculty will be examined. The murals, made as a didactic tool for medical students [Sabernig, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014] are based on a text written by the skilled physician and anatomist Blo-bzang-chos-grags (1638–1710). The personal physician of the Fifth Dalai Lama was a prominent proponent of the *Zur lugs* medical school standing in line with the view that the *Four Treatises* are the work of a Tibetan scholar rather than the word of the Buddha. In one of his works he explained the second part of the *Four Treatises*, the *Explanatory Treatise* or *Bshad rgyud*, with the help of a tree metaphor [blo-bzang-chos-grags, 2005]. He played an important role in the development of Tibetan medicine in Lhasa at the end of the “golden” seventeenth century. In the case of the Labrang murals, the perfect environment of Lta na sdug is not depicted at all in one of the murals. However, to my mind, if we consider the

broader topographic context of the location and architectural arrangement of the Medical Faculty within the whole monastery complex it symbolically fulfils most of the details described in the legendary city Lta na sdug. Additionally, its temple hosts a magnificent medicine Buddha and the surrounding landscape is rich of important medicinal ingredients.

Thirdly, I would like to introduce another arrangement of murals that can be found in a small monastery known as Rkang tsha dgon pa. The two murals located at the entrance of the main temple were painted by the same artist, namely Snying-lcags-byams-zer (born 1950), who painted the current version of the murals at Labrang monastery but shows a completely different, more vivid form of depiction of the environment described in the first chapter of the *Four Treatises*. The main characteristic of these unknown modern paintings is their social expressions of interpersonal behaviour.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that none of the mentioned depictions illustrate the environment exactly as it is described in the *Four Treatises*. In what follows I will compare the three artistic media according to their structural organisation regarding the architecture of Lta na sdug, their religious symbolism as well as their depicted materia medica.

The architecture of the mythical city is well described in the *Four Treatises*. The precious palace of the Buddha of medicine is situated right in the centre of the city. As will be shown later on in more details, it is surrounded by four mountain slopes facing each of the four cardinal directions and a variety of prestigious medicinal substances of “magic” or “material” pharmacological value that can be found growing in each of these regions. Yet, as Janet Gyatso points out, the topography of the city is not obvious and a historical Tibetan discussion on this question is still ongoing. It is not clear whether the mountain slopes surround the medical city in the form of ranges locating the place in a valley or if the town with the medicine Buddha residing in the centre is situated on the top of a mountain, which slopes gently to all the four cardinal directions [Gyatso, 2015, p. 174f., 281]. The geographical location of this mythical city is discussed controversially in current literature as well. Among various opinions which can be found — I will just mention some of them — the Indian scholar Dash believes that this mythical city has been ‘variously identified as Varanasi (presently in Uttar Pradesh) and Bodha Gaya (presently forms part of Bihar)’ [Dash, 1994, p. 3]. Yuri Parfionovitch and his team tend to locate this place in the Land Oḍḍiyāna or to Mount Meru [Parfionovitch et al., 1992, p. 17]. Janet Gyatso examined a series of inner Tibetan discussions on possibilities to locate the place in a Buddhist, Tibetan, individual or secret context. Summarising, she presents different viewpoints approx-

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<sup>2</sup> Different aspects of this project have been published or are in the process of publishing [Sabernig, 2011]. An article on the general history of the murals [Sabernig, 2012] includes a short and preliminary discussion of the details presented in this paper and one picture at Rkang tsha dgon pa. Figure 1 has been published originally in ZAS 42 [Sabernig, 2013]. Copyright holder of all pictures: Katharina Sabernig.

inating the topic rather allegorically — *Lta na sdug* from an inner, outer and secret perspective: “...the outer Tanaduk [ed: = *lta na sdug*] is any place where you can meet the Medicine Buddha. That turns out to include all the places that scholars have proposed as the site where the Four Treatises were originally preached: Oḍḍiyāna, India, Akaniṣṭa, Sumeru. The inner Tanaduk is the town where you live, wherein you yourself become the Medicine Buddha. The secret Tanaduk is you own body, the parts of which are identified with the various mountains and places of the Tanaduk legend [Gyatso, 2015, p.281]. She concludes about a “successive spiritualization of place” where imagination and meditation locate the myth into space [Gyatso 2015, p.281]. In this paper, however, I want to follow her point from a visual perspective suggesting that these principles may be adapted to the local environment of any place of professional Tibetan medical practice.

The three visual representations show different details of the structural organisation of the city. Artfully designed thangka number one of the Ulan-Ude set is well known and has been described in detail [Parfionovitch et al., 1992; Byams-pa-vphrin-las & Wang Lei, 1994]. The precious palace in the centre houses the Buddha of medicine who is surrounded by elaborately painted hermits, gods and Bodhisattvas (no.3–31) as it is described in the legend. The palace has an entrance towards each of the four cardinal directions and is ensconced within different walls and houses. The town is surrounded by the four mountain ranges depicting the materia medica, which is discussed in more detail further on. As a two-dimensional medium without using perspective distortion, it remains open as to whether the city is located in a valley or on the top of a mountain.

The murals at Labrang Monastery can be found in the inner courtyard of the Medical Faculty. They are painted on the southern part of the walls surrounding the building (see fig. 1). Although there would have been enough space to arrange the murals along the two inner walls, the sequence of the murals is designed so that each of the four cardinal directions is represented. The starting point of the murals is located on the southern wall. The door, which is the main entrance to the Medical Faculty, is located so that it faces almost exactly south. The murals depicting the *Root-Tantra*, the first part of the *Four Treatises* called *Rtsa rgyud*, follow the right side and end at the western wall. The murals depicting the much more extensive second part of the *Four Treatises* called *Tantra of Explanation* or *Bshad rgyud* are distributed along the larger part of the southern wall. The whole eastern wall ends on the northern wall with the mural depicting the chapter on the healing physician. With the exception of one mural located on the western wall, which is arranged so that it is slightly apart, none of the murals show any Buddhist elements. The slightly separated mural on the western wall shows the eight Buddhist emblems of good luck and the popular story of the four befriended animals as a symbol of societal health. Ornamentation on the other murals shows regional landscapes and some botanical features but no further Buddhist symbols.

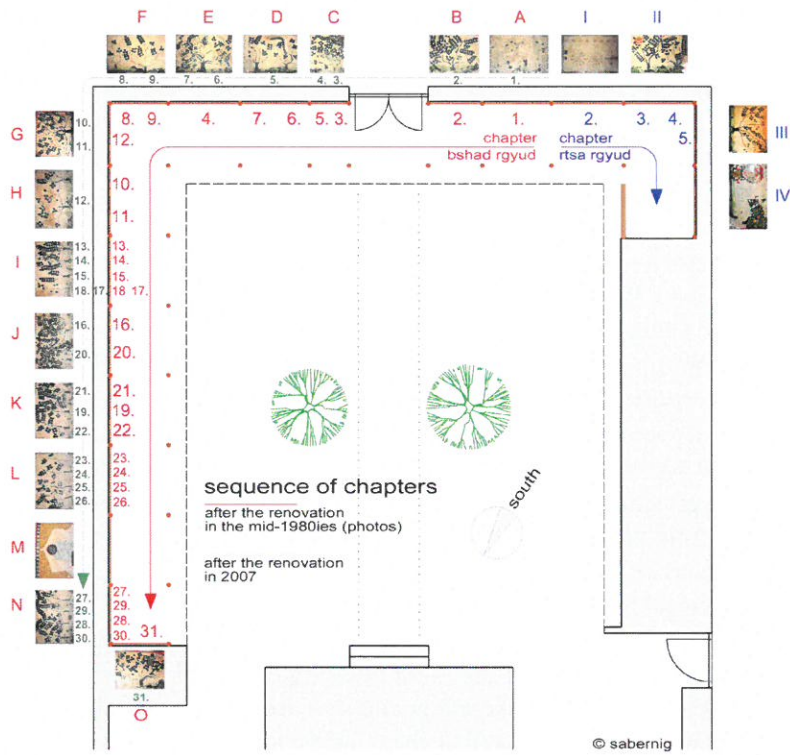


Fig. 1. Eighteen murals located in the four cardinal directions in the inner courtyard of the Medical Faculty at Labrang Monastery.



Fig. 2. The Medical Faculty [\*] is located in the centre of Labrang Monastery, which is surrounded by different forms of mountain ranges.

The absence of Buddhist symbols on the medical murals does not necessarily mean that there is no Buddhist connection. At the heart of the Medical Faculty is the temple where the precious medicine Buddha resides, and it is located on the open side of the murals' arrangement. The Medical Faculty at Labrang Monastery was not only well known for its medical services soon after its establishment, but also for practising elaborate Buddhist rituals mentioned in the treatise *G. yu thog snying thig* [Nietupsky, 2011, p. 21, 32–36; Yonten Gyatso, Buffetrille, 1987, p. 8]. The Medical Faculty is situated almost in the centre of Labrang Monastery (figure two [Gruschke, 2001, p. 187]). Over the course of time Labrang Monastery became one of the six most important Gelugpa monasteries in Tibet. The religious centre is surrounded by various mountain ranges where many plants of pharmacological importance flourish. The northern range is dry because the sun dries the earth, and the shadier southern range is wooded. This geographical situation is somehow at odds with the classical text if it were to be taken too literally. The ranges open onto a plateau with huge blooming grasslands in the West. East of Labrang the mountains are massed together. The gentle hills and higher mountains as well as fruitful grasslands have a rich variety of flora and many flowers of local origin ornament the Labrang murals.

The third visual media depicting features of Lta na sdug can be visited at Rkang tsha dgon pa, a small monastery near the city of Gtsos (pinyin *hezuo*). The two lovely murals located at the entrance of the main building depict all the six chapters of the *Root-Tantra*. Although in terms of content and style these paintings differ greatly from both, the *Blue Beryl* Thangkas as well as the Labrang murals, this smaller medical college has a close connection to the Medical Faculty at Labrang Monastery. In the turbulent second half of the twentieth century, the head of Labrang Medical Faculty, the highly respected Xa-khu-bstan-pa Rgya-mtsho-tshang (1925–~2001), was a throne holder at the medical college of Rkang tsha dgon pa. The second connection is even more important in the context of this paper. The murals at Labrang Monastery were repainted during the renovation of the monastery after the Cultural Revolution. In order to carry out this renovation, the secular painter and physician Snying-lcags-byams-zer was advised by his teacher Xa-khu-bstan-pa Rgya-mtsho-tshang. The painter Snying-lcags-byams-zer was born in the village of Rkang tsha dgon pa. In his younger years he was educated in rudimentary primary health care and studied the art of Tibetan medicine and painting. Later on, he painted the murals at his birthplace in Rkang tsha dgon pa [Sabernig, 2012]. He painted highly detailed and lovingly designed aspects of the medical city Lta na sdug but stylistically very different to the murals at Labrang monastery. For example, the picture detail in figure three shows birds as mentioned in the *Rgyud bzhi* or even in the *Vaidūrya sngon po* (*Blue Beryl*). They are supposed to be found at the western range of the medical city: khrung khrung (crane), rma bya (peacock), khu byug (cuckoo), kha la ping ka (sparrow), ne tso (parrot). One can find couples of birds and even a mother bird feeding its chick with a worm.

In the same mural one finds strong animals as mentioned in the first chapter. They are associated with great healing power (fig. 4), yet not found at all on the Mu-



Fig. 3. Different birds that can be found at the western mountain range of Lta na sdug.



Fig. 4. Strong animals bearing healing power are symbolically important.

als at Labrang monastery. The thangkas on the other part depict them very small in size on the edge of the northern range, presented at the bottom of the thangka as it is painted in the traditional geographical style. Important ingredients in Tibetan pharmacology are derived from these animals, such as the bile of a bear (dom mkhris), musk (gla rtsi), or a certain “stone” from an elephant (glang po che). The white elephant which represents the whole corpus of Indian wisdom has human eyes and even looks timid while one of his legs is hidden behind a bouquet of flowers held in his trunk. The medicinal ingredients are usually substituted by more common ones

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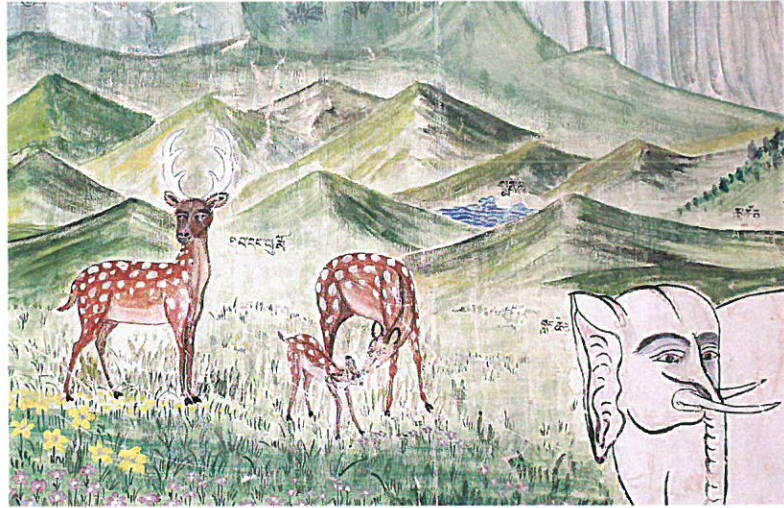


Fig. 5. Painter Snying-Icags-byams-zer interpreted Lta na sdug full of love and family care.



Fig. 6. A pomegranate tree on the left side, a myrobalan tree on the right side and animals full of family love make the ornamenting frame of the depiction of the fourth and fifth chapter of the *Rgyud bzhi* in the form of a tree metaphor.

in modern daily medical practice, but they are important from a mythological and archaic medical perspective and are supposed to be found on the southern side of the city of Lta na sdug.

Additionally, one can find medical water, flower meadows, mountains and deer, which are all described in the introductory chapter of the *Rgyud bzhi* and can be found in the northern range. Couples or whole families like this deer family are not mentioned in the classical text and can be regarded as a personal interpretation made by the modern and secular painter, but this is not in contradiction to the tradition.

The second painting shows the chapters of diagnostics and therapeutic intervention, which make the fourth and fifth chapters of the *Rgyud bzhi* in the form



of “unfolded trees” (sdong vgrems). They are depicted in the Labrang murals and Thangka collection, too. At the bottom one can find once again important medical ingredients supposed to grow around Lta na sdug. On the left-hand side in figure six we find a pomegranate tree and deer as they are described as being found in the southern range. We see a peacock with his wife, again wild roses, grains, an elephant with his child under palm trees and, on the very right side of the painting, the most important ingredient in Tibetan medical mythology is depicted: the tree of the myrobalan fruit, called Xa ru ra or *Terminallia chebula*, which should be found at the eastern range. Although Snying-lcags-byams-zer painted many details mentioned in the classical texts, he did not paint them all. This is especially noticeable in the case of certain spices and plants, but it is obvious that the artist and physician tried to paint aspects of the medical city Lta na sdug in a skilful, heartfelt manner full of solidarity and family love. This does not mean that he could not paint medicinal plants. He told me that he had painted all medicines mentioned in the *Rgyud bzhi* according to botanical accuracy for a museum of traditional medicine and showed me some of his examples, which look like modern botanical paintings. In the Medical Faculty at Labrang monastery he painted medicinal plants as ornamentation to the “unfolded trees” in a completely different style.

Compared with the murals in the small monastery of Rkang tsha dgon pa, thangka number one of the set illustrating the *Blue Beryl* appears more complete and professional in terms of its depiction of materia medica. The southern range is located at the bottom of the painting (no. 32–52), the northern range on the upper edge, (no. 54–73) the eastern range on the right-hand side (no. 74–86), and the western range can be found on the left-hand side (no. 87–109) from the viewer’s perspective. As the thangka is well known, the description is just exemplary. All ingredients growing around the city of Tibetan medicine mentioned in the *Rgyud bzhi* are illustrated in great detail, even the pomegranate is shown with its small kernels, or different forms of pepper or asafoetida are shown. The depicted animals are placed in the background and without much facial expression.

At Labrang monastery the material medica is portrayed again very differently. The trees depict the content of certain chapters, but the ornamentation does not reflect any animal or prominent aspect of the materia medica which could be found around the city of Lta na sdug. In general, the murals are not made for pleasure or to delight a lay visitor, they are made as a didactic tool for medical education, to help with memorising or teaching texts which are otherwise difficult to understand.

At Labrang monastery Snying-lcags-byams-zer painted ornamentation consisting of landscapes with gentle ranges of hills and little rivers babbling through the grasslands (see figure 7). In the foreground one can find botanical features, which are part of the local flora. Different types of *Gentiana sp.*, Narrow Leaf, Buttercup (*Ranunculus sp.*) or Monkshood (*Aconitum sp.*) are depicted. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the history of the Labrang murals [Sabernig, 2012], but it is necessary to know that the murals at Labrang have been repainted at least

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Fig. 7. This slide gives some examples of regional medicinal plants within the murals and as they grow around Labrang Monastery. On the left you see Monkshut (*Aconitum* sp.), in the middle *Gentiana* sp. and on the right side some kind of Alpine Aster.

twice — structurally the content and symbolism is still the same, but the artistic implementation is less elaborate in the new version. The versions I have documented were both painted by Snying-lcags-byams-zer. He restored the murals with much effort after the Cultural Revolution and he painted them again in 2007 because a renovation became necessary due to water-drainage problems in the courtyard.

I always wondered and it is still not certain why the local authorities did not commission murals depicting details of the *materia medica* surrounding the medical city *Lta na sdug* and why the whole introductory chapter is not depicted within a mural. I asked monks who studied in the Medical Faculty at Labrang, but their answers were rather vague. In the museum belonging to the hospital of Tibetan medicine at Labrang Monastery I found a set of paintings with trees depicting the same structure as in the medical college but the ornamentation was quite different. It showed animals, such as peacocks, musk deer, elephants, and even whales splashing around the water [Sabernig, 2012, p. 376] but no botanical plants. At the beginning of my investigation I thought that this obvious difference in the ornamentation was perhaps possible because it might have had no specific meaning. After studying the ornamentation of various medical paintings, however, I have found that ornamentation always relates somehow to the medical city of *Lta na sdug* or a place where medicine can be practised in a perfect manner.

## 2. Conclusion

However, in a broader context I would like to formulate a preliminary and personal interpretation. In the temple of the Medical Faculty at Labrang Monastery, the precious medicine Buddha is accommodated; the temple is surrounded by a wall with murals located in all the four cardinal directions; the Medical Faculty is situated right in the centre of the monastery complex in a fertile region with mountain ranges and grasslands full of medicinal plants. Did the local Buddhist authorities claim to have established a medical centre which fulfilled the theoretical concept of a place to practice medicine in a perfect way? A statement by dbal-mang-paṇḍita suggests that they did [dbal-mang-paṇḍita, 1987, p.264/16], but why is this chapter not depicted within the murals? One reason could be that the authorities were following the *Zur lugs* tradition, which was in favour of the text being written by a Tibetan scholar instead of being the word of the Buddha. Located right in the heart of a centre of Buddhist power, in one of the most important Gelugpa monasteries, there seemed to be no need to underline a general Buddhist connection. The depiction of local materia medica instead of the described one in the classical text may be interpreted as a demonstration of self-confidence. To conclude with Janet Gyatso's theory, the whole complex of Labrang Monastery constitutes a form of outer as well as inner Lta na sdug, meditating monks would represent the secret Lta na sdug. The mythical city is a legend in the history of literature, and on a poetical level one could add that the medical college at Lcags po ri in Lhasa could be regarded as an "upper" Lta na sdug, at the top of a mountain, and the Medical College at Labrang monastery as a "lower" Lta na sdug at the centre of the valley. The murals at Rkang tsha dgon pa painted by Snying-lcags-byams-zer are the visual expression of the vivid interpretation of the medical legend by a secular human being educated in Tibetan art and medicine.

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