

SLSA Annual report 2012

**The Obtsho Dzong Ruin –
Inventory and Documentation of a pre-Zhabdrung Dzong
under Gasas Dzongkhag in Northern Bhutan**

Christian Bader, in collaboration with Karma Tenzin, Kasumi Ishida, Pema Wangda,
Sangay Kinga, Sonam Tenzin, Sumjay Tshering, Tashi Dawa, Tenzin Wangchuk,
Tshering, Ugyen Norbu

Report of the investigation

Inv. No. 06/01
Obtsho Dzong

Khatoed Gewog
Gasas Dzongkhag

Map No. Bhutan 1: 50'000 No. 78E-9
Coordinate: N 584527.893 E 219819.114
Altitude: 2542.676 m above sea level, as per NLC-0015379

Date of the inventory and documentation: November 5–18, 2012
Bibliography about the site: none
Samples: none
Age determination: Late Medieval Age, according to the historical research

Responsible: Christian Bader, Sangay Kinga, Karma Tenzin

Fig. 1 Obtsho Dzong ruin. View from the south.



Content

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Cause and nature of the investigation
- 1.2 Procedure of work

2 Geographical location and topography of the site

3 Description of Features

- 3.1 General description of the site
- 3.2 The structural elements: Catalogue of positions 1–15

4 The History of the Obtsho Family and the Dzong

- 4.1 Preliminary notes
- 4.2 Background of Obtsho Cheoeje of Gasa
- 4.3 Nomenclature of Obtsho in the context of Bhutan
- 4.4 The role of the Obtsho Lama in the political and religious history of Bhutan
- 4.5 Conclusion

5 Bibliography

Fig.2 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Bird's eye view of the fortress. View from the southwest.
Photo: Sonam Tenzin



1 Introduction

1.1 Cause and nature of the Investigation

After a rescue excavation in the Sarpang district in south Bhutan was successfully carried out in the previous year within the framework of the Bhutan-Swiss Archaeology Project, it was then necessary to inventory and document the ruins of the Obtsho Dzong in the northern Gasa district in 2012 (Fig. 3)¹. The investigation was once again organised by the SLSA with the assistance of Helvetas Bhutan and the DCHS as an educational unit resp. training, and took place as Module 6 of the CAS *Practice in Archaeology* under the scientific direction of the University of Zurich². The team in Bhutan consisted largely of the participants who already took part in the training excavation in 2011. The team was supervised by Christian Bader, SLSA archaeologist³. As opposed to an archaeological excavation, the aim of the inventory was to document and interpret the existing substance without interfering with the soil whatsoever.

The inventory method can be characterised as follows:

- Non-invasive investigation
- Collection of all information available without excavation
- Obtaining profound knowledge of a site as a base for site management and decisions about further procedures

The inventory of a site inventory consists of the following components:

- Overview ground plan of the site
- Description of the visible structures
- Photographic documentation of the structures
- Drawings of the structures
- Historical research, such as work with literature, unpublished writings and unpublished historical documents, interviews with local people (oral history)

¹ Rescue Excavation 2011 cf.: Christian Bader, A rural Settlement at Sangkha under Sarpang Dzongkhag in Southern Bhutan – Results of the Training Excavation 2011, SLSA Annual Report 2011: 187–209.

² Bhutan-Swiss Archaeology Project cf.: Philippe Della Casa, Peter Fux, Andreas Mäder, Bhutan-Swiss collaboration to institutionalise archaeology in Bhutan, SLSA Annual Report 2011: 173–186.

³ Participants 2012 who took part in the excavation in 2011: Karma Tenzin, Pema Wangda, Sangay Kinga, Sonam Tenzin, Tashi Dawa, Tenzin Wangchuk, Tshering, Ugyen Norbu. Cf.: Karma Tenzin: A rural Settlement at Sangkha under Sarpang Dzongkhag in Southern Bhutan – Report of the Training Excavation 2011, SLSA Annual Report 2011: 212.

Newcomers in the team 2012: Kasumi Ishida, DCHS, Sumjay Tshering, Lecturer Sherubtse College, Kanglung, Bhutan.

Fig. 3 Obtsho Dzong ruin. The situation of the site in Gasa Dzongkhag.



1.2 Procedure of work

The ten-member team was divided into three groups of three resp. four people. Group A investigated the main structures on the inside of the Dzong, while group B focused on the defensive wall and the ditch. Group C documented the findings in the perimeter of the complex. Each group carried out their own work in their respective fields, i.e. calibration of the findings and drawing a ground plan, description of the findings and making drawings and taking photographs for documentation purposes. Due to the fact that only one point of reference was given by the National Land Commission at the centre of the ruins, the surveyers level was used to measure two line levelings in order to obtain benchmarks of altitude across the entire site. Besides the documentation work, group C went to the villages in the surrounding area and interviewed the public in order to acquire oral histories. It was then established that the farmers in the region hardly had any historical information whatsoever about the Obtsho Dzong ruin. Furthermore, the team looked at all available published and unpublished secondary literature regarding the history of the Obtsho family and the Dzong. A summary of the current state of research was then written under the guidance of Sumjay Tshering, lecturer of the Sherubtse College, at Kanglung (cf. Chapter 4, The History of the Obtsho Family and the Dzong).

2 Geographical location and topography of the Obtsho Dzong site

The Obtsho site under Khatoed Gewog and Gasa Dzongkhag is situated on the north-eastern flank of a hill directly above the farm road leading from Punakha to Gasa Dzong – just before it crosses the Same Chhu (Fig. 4). The entire Obtsho settlement occupies an area of approx. 3 ha featuring escarpments and artificial terraces.

The actual ruin of the Obtsho Dzong at an altitude of approx. 2,540 m.a.s.l. is located on the foremost edge of a flat promontory that separates the mountain flank descending to the north halfway up. This way, the Dzong adopts a dominant position with a panoramic view over the valley, the Mo Chhu river and the road leading to Gasa. The Gasa Dzong and its settlement are situated at an aerial distance of 800 m north of the opposite mountain flank.

3 Description of Features

3.1 General description of the site

The Obtsho Dzong is a complex of buildings featuring the clear character of a stronghold (Fig. 5 and 6). The complex in its present form is for example well comparable to castles in the Swiss Jura from the 13th century. The main tower pos. 1 which we call *Utse* – based on Bhutanese Dzongs built later on under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal – as well as the other buildings pos. 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 – some of them as extensions to this *Utse* – are protected towards the south and west by a circumferential enclosure wall (defence wall) which includes regularly spaced narrow shooting slits pos. 10.4 that are arranged one above the other in two rows. The upper slits near the setback of the enclosure wall prove that a wall-walk most probably existed. The wall remains pos. 10.5 originate from construction works leaning against the enclosure wall on the inside of the Dzong. The gate tower pos. 9 is the only entrance to the fortification. The outside gate in the southern tower wall pos. 9.3 derives from two phases and was once narrowed by a bricked up embrasure. The interior gate could not be documented, but it must have been set in the northern tower pos. 9.2 on the opposite side.

In the north, naturally protected by the sheer rock walls, the Obtsho Dzong is protected towards the south and west by the aforementioned semi-circular defence wall pos. 10 – above all, it is detached from the remaining plateau by a protruding trench pos. 11. In places, this trench is up to 7 m wide and 3 m deep, and it has an inner and outer retaining wall (pos. 11.10 resp. 11.11). Only a narrow bridge pos. 11.1 leads across the trench into an area of the outer bailey which includes economic structures pos. 12–

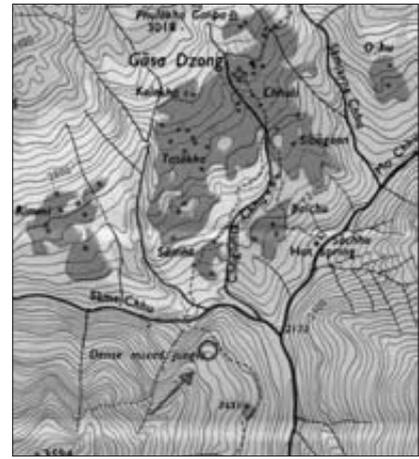


Fig. 4 Obtsho Dzong ruin.
Topographic situation of the site.

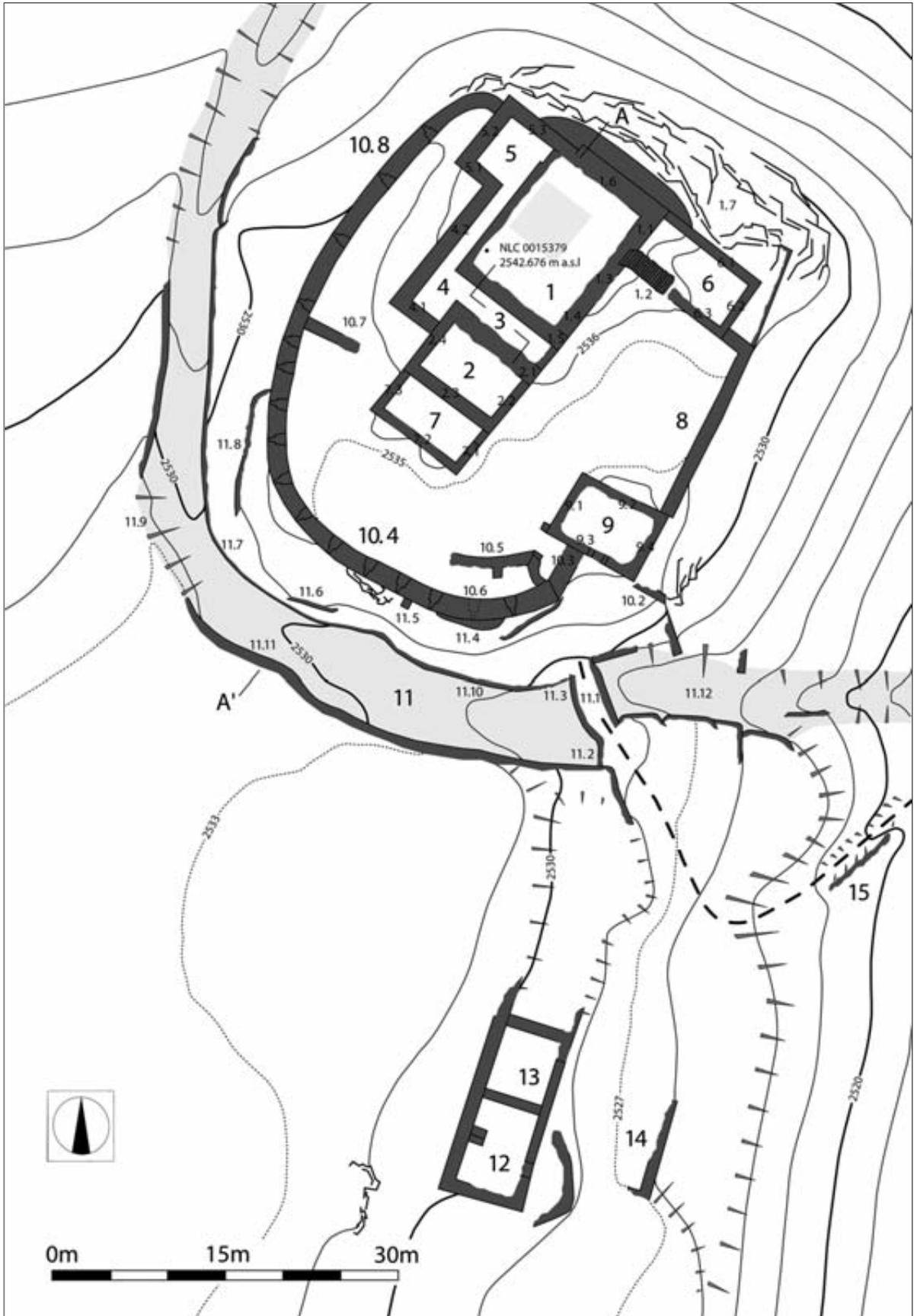


Fig. 5 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Overview ground plan of the Dzong ruin.

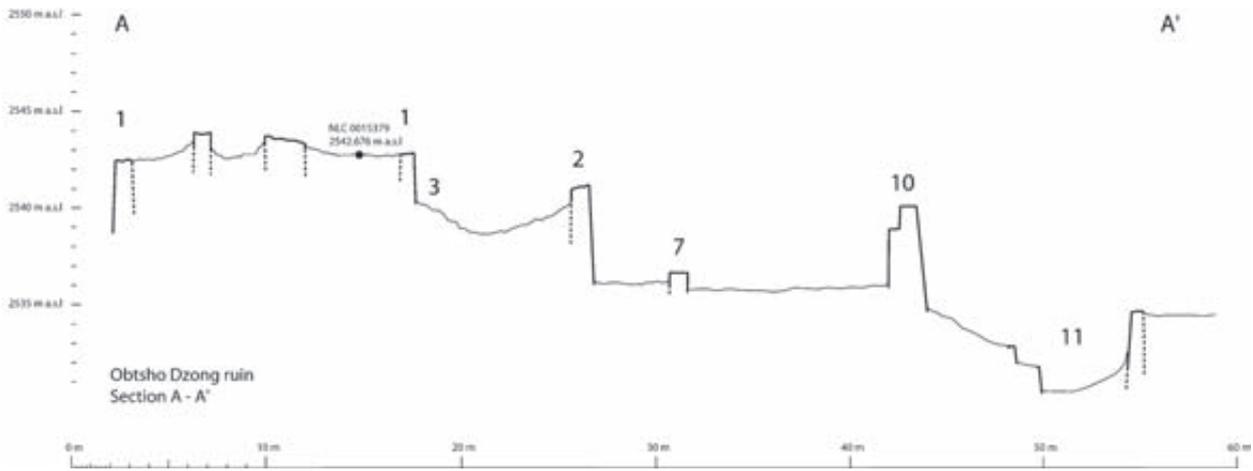


Fig. 6

14. Here, the rediscovered original access path pos. 15 branches off towards the north-east, leading in a zig-zag line down the eastern flank of the mountain to the former overgrown footpath from Punakha to Gasa which is no longer in use.

Nowadays, the entrance to the terrace is on the southeastern side. It is possible that, in historic times, an access path did exist which led to a civilian settlement upstream from the Obtsho Dzong. Except for the buildings pos. 12–14, no other architectural remains can be observed on the terrace today. In fact, the flank of the mountain is overgrown by dense, almost impenetrable bamboo forests. Particularly walnut and chestnut trees are frequently found. Before the investigation, the entire plateau of the Obtsho Dzong ruin was cleared by local farmers, i.e. the bamboo was cleared away, but the trees were left standing.

3.2 The structural elements – Catalogue of positions 1–15

Karma Tenzin, Kasumi Ishida, Pema Wangda, Sangay Kinga, Sonam Tenzin, Sumjay Tshering, Tashi Dawa, Tenzin Wangchuk, Tshering, Ugyen Norbu

General description of masonry positions 1–10 and 12–14

The masonry of all Dzong buildings including the enclosure wall seems to be very consistent and can be described here in a general manner (Fig. 7). It is a double-shelled cavity wall made of roughly processed stones with beige clay used as a binding agent.

Fig. 6 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Section from north to south.

Fig. 7 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Detail of a typical wall section. Outside of the enclosure pos. 10.4.



7

Fig. 8 Obtsho Dzong ruin.
Staircase pos. 1.2 to the Utse.

The stones were mainly bricked up as stretchers and in clearly visible layers. Sporadically, a few stones appear to have been used as headers. Irregularities in the layers – individual stones can be found in two, and in rare cases even three layers – were evened out by using small and flat material. Likewise, spaces and larger seams were tweaked using small and tiny stones. The wall corners are carefully interlocked due to the fact that the corner stretchers of the connected wall sides regularly alternate from stone layer to stone layer. What is striking is the fact that, with the exception of pos. 7, all walls of the building slightly taper towards the inside in a pyramidal manner – a characteristic which can regularly be observed on traditional structures in Bhutan. It is also typical that there are no architectural sculptures whatsoever. There are no door or window jambs made of stone. In fact, the embrasures were joined together in a carefully interlocking manner with the same stone material as used for the walls. Jambs were subsequently made of wood – a procedure that is still carried out today. In the case of Obtsho, the woodworking could unfortunately not be preserved.

Position 1 (*Utse*, general description)

Main building, 11 × 15 m, directly connected to the northern edge of the plateau over the steep cliff (Fig. 5). At least two floors have been preserved. The building is completely filled with debris and a collapsed wall. At the centre, a secondary masonry rises above the debris, possibly even due to a decayed *Chorten*. In any case, the space is still used for religious ceremonies even today. The only access is via the staircase pos. 1.2.

Position 1.1

Eastern wall of the *Utse* northern part. It is also the western wall of building pos. 6. In connection with the northern *Utse* wall pos. 1.6. The staircase pos. 1.2 pushes at a right angle to the wall pos. 1.1.

Position 1.2

Stone staircase as today's access to the *Utse*, not the original construction, later addition, connecting directly to the second floor of the *Utse*. Dry masonry, hardly processed rectangular or platy stones of different sizes in irregular layers (Fig. 8). The staircase lies on the same axis to the Position 6.3 (S wall of structure 6) and starts from the collapsed part of the wall pos. 6.3.

Position 1.3

Eastern wall of the *Utse* middle part, continuation of pos. 1.1. The top section of the wall collapsed, because a tree grown on top of this wall fell down. In the middle of this wall, there is an edge, most probably for an opening (window?).





Fig.9 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall and staircase pos. 1.1–1.5 of the Utse.

9

Fig.10 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall pos. 2.1 and 2.2 of the building pos. 2



10

Position 1.4

Eastern wall of the *Utse* southern part, continuation of pos. 1.3. Not in connection with the southern *Utse* wall pos. 1.5 (Fig. 9).

Position 1.5

Southern wall of the *Utse*. The corner edge of this wall is not interlocked with the edge of the eastern *Utse* wall pos. 1.4. This is a quite unusual type of construction without a corner joint between the perpendicular walls.

Position 1.6

Northern wall of the *Utse*. This wall rests on the semicircular retaining wall pos. 1.7. There is an opening in the wall, possibly by a window.

Position 1.7

Structure built into the rocks on the northern side of the terrace as a retaining wall for the *Utse* construction. Mud mortar masonry wall of small stretchers carefully placed in layers. Length 15 m, rounded ends.

Position 2 (Building south of *Utse* pos. 1)

South of the *Utse* there is an independent building pos. 2 which is only separated from the main tower pos. 1 by a corridor pos. 3. Its eastern facades – and also those be-

longing to the building pos. 7 – all lie on a common axis. The building pos. 2 measures approx. 7×9 m on the ground plan. The majority of the walls are preserved up to the 2nd floor; the interior of the building is however filled with debris almost to the top of the walls. No statements can be made about the function of the building.

Position 2.1

Northern wall of the building pos. 2. Most of the wall is collapsed and buried under debris, only the western and the eastern corners are visible. In the west, 2.1 is in connection with the wall pos. 2.4. In the east, pos. 2.1 is also not interlocked with the wall pos. 2.2 (analogically to pos. 1.3 and 1.4 of the *Utse*).

Position 2.2

Eastern wall of the building pos. 2 (Fig. 10). There are two openings in the wall: one window, or more likely a drain outlet 30×80 cm on the base of the ground floor level, and one slit 5×40 cm on the first floor level. This wall pos. 2.2 is interlocked with the southern wall pos. 2.3.

Position 2.3

Southern wall of the building pos. 2. There is a window (clear width 45 cm) which was bricked at some later time and also a slit on the ground floor level. Another window and also a slit can be observed on the first floor level in the same position. This wall pos. 2.3 is interlocked with the western wall pos. 2.4.

Position 2.4

Western wall of the building pos. 2. Interlocked with the northern wall pos. 2.1. There is a small opening at the base of the wall pos. 2.4, probably a drain outlet, comparable to the opening of pos. 2.2. On the first floor level there is a slit 5×40 cm.

Position 3 (Corridor between *Utse* pos. 1 und building pos. 2)

At the beginning, the walls pos. 1.5 and pos. 2.1 were regarded as the northern resp. southern wall of an independent building pos. 3. After intensive clarifications on the site had been made, we realised that they must have been the walls of the *Utse* pos. 1 resp. of the building pos. 2. An intermediate building pos. 3 could no longer be postulated. Pos. 3 was in fact a corridor measuring 9×2.1 m which led further to the corridor pos. 4 in the west, from where the building pos. 5 – connected to the *Utse* in the west – was finally able to be reached. Corridor pos. 3 must have been the main access point of the central buildings of the *Obtsho Dzong*. A small debris cone at the foot of the eastern facade might possibly indicate an external staircase leading to a representative entrance gate at about the same height as the first floor.

Position 4 (Corridor)

In the west, corridor pos. 4 – which runs parallel to the western wall of the *Utse* pos. 1 – connects to corridor pos. 3 at a right angle (Fig. 5). It is 13 m long and 1.4 m wide along the *Utse*. In the north, the corridor pos. 4 leads to the building pos. 5.

Position 4.1

Southern masonry wall of the corridor pos. 4. The wall pos. 4.1 adjoins the wall pos. 2.4. and is interlocked with the western corridor wall 4.2. On the outside, in the middle of the wall pos. 4.1, there is a hollow horizontal band. Probably a wooden beam, which is rotted away now, must have been inserted there (Fig. 11).

Position 4.2

Western masonry wall of the corridor pos. 4. In the north, it adjoins the south wall pos. 5.1 of the building pos. 5. The wall is fully covered with debris and grass.



Fig. 11 Obtsho Dzong ruin. South face of the wall pos. 4.1 of the corridor pos. 4.

Fig. 12 Obtsho Dzong ruin. West face of the wall pos. 5.2 of the building pos. 5.

Fig. 13 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall pos. 6.2 in the interior of the building pos. 6.

11



12

Position 5 (Building)

This is a rectangular building which is located west of the *Utse* pos. 1. The interior measures approx. 4.5×5 m.

Position 5.1

Southern masonry wall of building pos. 5 (Fig. 12). A huge tree grew on top of the wall, causing damage to the structure. But it still seems not to be interlocked with the corridor wall pos. 4.2.

Position 5.2

Western masonry wall of building pos. 5. The defence wall pos. 10.8 joins near the northern corner. The wall pos. 5.2. is connected both with wall pos. 5.1 and the northern wall pos. 5.3.

Position 5.3

Northern masonry wall of building pos. 5. The foundation lies partly on solid rock and partly on the retaining wall pos. 1.7. The wall pos. 5.3 has a hollow band at the top running from west to east, probably from a wooden beam which was formerly inserted. The wall pos. 5.3 seems to adjoin the corner of the north *Utse* wall pos. 1.6. But the relationship of the walls in the northwest corner of the *Utse* pos. 1 remains unclear. In this area, further investigations of building analysis and exposure are necessary.



13

Position 6 (Building)

This building is attached to the eastern side of *Utse* pos. 1. It is two stories high. Due to the wall thickness of only 90 cm this building cannot have been much higher and therefore should not be considered as a watch tower but rather as a residence. The interior measures approx. 4.5×9 m (Fig. 13).

Position 6.1

Northern masonry wall of building pos. 6. This wall adjoins the corner of the *Utse* wall position 1.1. There is a cut-out on top of the wall, probably for a window opening.

Position 6.2

Eastern masonry wall of building pos. 6. On the first floor level, there is a shooting slit for defence purposes. The masonry corner joint between the walls of position 6.2 and position 6.3 is quite unique and is overlapped in layers, like a corner joint in a rammed earth construction.

Position 6.3

Southern masonry wall of building pos. 6. There is a tree on the top which almost destroyed the wall. The outer face of the wall pos. 6.3 lies on an axis with the staircase pos. 1.2 leading to the *Utse* pos. 1. Most probably the staircase is built on the western ruin parts of pos. 6.3.

Position 7 (Building, later addition)

South of the building pos. 2, the building pos. 7 follows with the same width of 9.2 m. Due to the existence of windows and slits in the southern wall pos. 2.3 of building pos. 2, we may assume that the extension pos. 7 did not belong to the original buildings, but that it was more likely added at a later date. Presumably, the window apertures of pos. 2.3 were bricked up on this occasion. Furthermore, the character of the walls of the extension pos. 7 is different to all the other Dzong buildings: in a less meticulous manner, smaller stones were used to form somewhat irregular layers.



Fig. 14 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall pos. 7.1 with the door of the building pos. 7.

14

Position 7.1

Eastern masonry wall of building pos. 7, with an opening of 1.5 m width in the middle of this wall, most probably the entrance of the building (Fig. 14). It is connected with the wall 7.2 and adjoins the southern wall pos. 2.3 of building pos. 2.

Position 7.2

Southern masonry wall of building pos. 7. This wall is totally collapsed in the middle section; only the eastern and western corners are preserved.

Position 7.3

Western masonry wall of building pos. 7. It is connected with the wall 7.2 and adjoins the southern wall pos. 2.3 of building pos. 2. The wall is also collapsed in the middle.

Position 8 (Enclosure wall, east)

There is an enclosure wall pos. 8 (earlier described as 10.1), with a thickness of 1.3 m, which extends from the eastern entrance tower pos. 9 to the northern building pos. 6 (Fig. 15). It was used for defence purposes – meanwhile it serves as a retaining wall of the courtyard. The wall does not have interconnection to the buildings pos. 6 and 8, but both the ends adjoin the buildings pos. 6 and 9. Although shooting slits like those of the defence wall pos. 10 are missing, different openings did nevertheless exist to-

Fig. 15 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Enclosure wall pos. 8. View from the inside. At the left corner of the building pos. 6.



15

Fig. 16 Obtsho Dzong ruin. West face of the wall pos. 9.1 of the entrance tower pos. 9.

Fig. 17 Obtsho Dzong ruin. North face of the wall pos. 9.2 of the entrance tower pos. 9.



16



17

wards the east, which are now filled with stones. Some part of the wall was collapsed and is unstable because of the trees growing on top of it. At the base of the enclosure wall pos. 8, near the junction to the entrance tower pos. 9, we can find the outlet of a drain featuring a rectangular shape.

Position 9 (Gate tower, main entrance)

The gate tower pos. 9 at the southeast corner of the fortress represents the only entrance to the Obtsho Dzong. At the same time, this building measuring 16.8×18.9 m on the outside, most probably also served as a watchtower. Due to destruction by trees on top of the walls their thickness cannot be determined anymore. The stone masonry wall of the tower pos. 9 also tapers on the inside.

Position 9.1

Western wall of the gate tower pos. 9 facing the courtyard (Fig. 16). There is a small opening of a slit on the first floor level in the middle section of the wall.

Position 9.2

Northern wall of the gate tower pos. 9. The inner gate must have been situated here. Since the wall collapsed in the middle, no remains of a gate were observed (Fig. 17). Further excavations are necessary to clarify this feature.

Position 9.3

Southern wall of the gate tower pos. 9 (Fig. 18). In the middle of the wall there is the opening of the outer gate, which originally had a width of 2.2 m. At an unknown date the gate was narrowed: pillars of 50 cm each were built at both sides of the gate in order to reduce the size of the width to 1.2 m. The top part of the gate is collapsed.

Position 9.4

Eastern wall of the gate tower pos. 9 (Fig. 19).

Position 10 (Enclosure wall, defence wall)

The main buildings of the Dzong are enclosed and protected by a stone masonry defence wall pos. 10. which stretches from northwest to southeast direction (Fig. 2, 20–22). There are two parts of the defence wall, one semi-circular in the south (pos. 10.4) and the continuation to the north in a slightly curved shape pos. 10.8 (Fig. 5).

Position 10.1

Position canceled, see pos. 8.

Position 10.2

Remains of stone masonry wall starting from the southeast corner of the gate tower pos. 9 and first leading towards the east and then continuing down towards the ditch

Fig. 18 Obtsho Dzong ruin. South face of the wall pos. 9.3 of the entrance tower pos. 9.

At the left corner of the defence wall pos. 10.4 and the wall 10.3 between defence wall and tower.

Fig. 19 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face pos. 9.4 of the entrance tower pos. 9 in the foreground on the left side. In the background: enclosure wall pos. 8.



18



19

Fig. 20 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Defence wall pos. 10.4 from the outside. At the foot of the defence wall on the right side: retaining wall pos. 11.4, and in the middle Lukhang pos. 11.5.

Fig. 21 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Defence wall pos. 10.4 and 10.8 from the outside.



20



21

pos. 11.12. Since most of the feature is covered with topsoil, the interpretation is insecure, but we assume that there might be masonry steps connecting the trench. Further excavations are necessary to clarify this feature.

Position 10.3

Stone masonry wall as a filling of the gap between defence wall pos. 10.4 and the gate tower pos. 9 (Fig. 18). The defence wall pos. 10.4 suddenly ends with an edge only 4 m before connecting to the wall pos. 9.3 of the gate tower. The gap in between was filled by a wall pos. 10.3 of the same character as all the other walls of the Dzong's main buildings. As an explanation for this feature we suggest that in medieval times separate teams were busy constructing the defence wall and the gate tower as well as other buildings at the same time. During the construction process of the gate tower the later entrance was not passable. Because the craftsmen also needed access to the interior of the Dzong, they left a gap and filled it later by building the wall pos. 10.3.

Position 10.4

Southern part of the enclosing defence wall in a semi-circular shape (Fig. 20). It stretches from the gap respectively the wall pos. 10.3 in the east to the courtyard partition wall pos. 10.7 in the northwest. The defence wall pos. 10.4 is two-storied with a parapet walk on the inside at a height of approx. 3 m. The wall's maximum height on the out-



22

Fig. 22 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Defence wall pos. 10.4 from the inside.



23

Fig. 23 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Defence wall pos. 10.4 from the inside. Detail of the first two shooting slits. The second one has been bricked up (pos. 10.6). In the foreground: wall pos. 10.5.

side measures approx. 7 to 8 m. On the interior ground floor level, the wall thickness measures approx. 2 m, and twelve shooting slits can be observed: a broad opening of a 90 cm width leads to a narrow slit which is only 10 cm wide. The lintels of the slits are made of one flat stone. One shooting slit opening has been filled with masonry (pos. 10.6). The wall thickness of the parapet measures approx. 1 m. Its upper part is largely destroyed, but a few shooting slits in the vertical axis of the ground floor slits are still visible.

Position 10.5

There is a stone masonry wall pos. 10.5 which runs parallel at a distance of 2.6 m to the defence wall pos. 10.4 (Fig. 5, 23). The wall is only about 40 to 50 cm high and visible for about 7 m from the current entrance. It is 80 cm thick. There is also a rectangular adjoining remnant of a partition wall. This structure might be interpreted as a building which was attached to the defence wall pos. 10.4 and gave access to the parapet walk of the wall.

Position 10.6

Second shooting slit from the east. At an unknown date this opening in the defence wall was filled with stone masonry which is comparatively poor (Fig. 23). On the outside we can see a vertical crack running down the wall at this point. Therefore we assume that the opening might have been blocked to increase the strength of the defence wall pos. 10.4 (see also Position 11.4).

Fig. 24 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Defence wall pos. 10.8. At the right corner pos. 5.1.

Fig. 25 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Ditch/trench pos. 11 with the inner and outer escarpment walls pos. 11.10 resp. pos. 11.11. View of the bridge pos. 11.1 and 11.2.



24



25

Position 10.7

The partition of the courtyard is a dry stone masonry pos. 10.7 which is 70 cm thick. It is not interlocked with the defence wall, but adjoins the enclosure (Fig. 5). There are two square holes measuring 1.2 m in height in the wall, possibly used for scaffolding purposes during the construction of the wall.

Position 10.8

The continuation of the defence wall pos. 10.4 starts from the partition wall pos. 10.7 and ends in the north by adjoining the building pos. 5. It is in a slightly curved shape (Fig. 24). On the outside of the enclosure, no change of character of the wall can be observed, but the section to the north is lower than the section prior to the partition pos. 10.7. On the interior, we can see that the level of the parapet walk is about 2 m lower. The thickness of the parapet wall measures 70 cm. In this northern section of the enclosure there are three shooting slits which are only visible from the outside since the backside courtyard is filled with debris. The outlet of the drainage can also be found on the outside and at the base of the wall towards the north.

Position 11

There is a ditch pos. 11 which separates the Dzong from the terrace. It starts from the east and leads in a quarter-circle shape around the fortress to the north. The ditch is up to 7 m wide. There are slightly tapering inner and outer escarpment walls (pos. 10.10



26

Fig. 26 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Ditch/trench pos. 11 with the outer escarpment wall pos. 11.11. View to the east.

Fig. 27 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Bridge pos. 11.1. West face of the wall.



27

resp. 10.11) with a maximum height of 3 m. The masonry is a dry wall without binding agents where unprocessed stones of different sizes were used randomly without building any layers. Vegetation growing through the gaps covers most parts of the masonry shell. A bridge pos. 11.1 over the ditch is the only access to the Dzong.

Position 11.1

The ditch pos. 11 which separates the Dzong towards the south is crossed by a bridge pos. 11.1 which is 2.8 m wide. It represents the only access path to the fortress and can also be described as a ramp, since there is no passage underneath the structure from the western part of the ditch to the eastern part (Fig. 27–28). The bridge is built of dry stone masonry. Plate-like flat stones of different sizes were used in more or less horizontal layers. The surface of the bridge cannot be seen as it is covered with topsoil.

Position 11.2

Near the junction to the outer escarpment wall, the western masonry shell of the bridge seems to be collapsed, since there is a 2 m wide gap. We found several stones that look like steps. Their size is much bigger than the size of other stones used for the bridge. Probably there was a small staircase as an entrance to the trench. Further excavations are necessary to clarify this feature.

Fig. 28 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Bridge pos. 11.1. East face of the wall.



28

Position 11.3

The inner escarpment wall is collapsed in the area where it formerly adjoined the western front of the bridge pos. 11.1. The damage concerns the wall on a length of 3.5 m (pos. 11.3).

Position 11.4

At the foot of the defence wall and in the area of the bricked up shooting slit there is a retaining or supporting wall pos. 11.4 with a maximum height of 1.5 m. It is a mud mortar masonry with stretchers of different sizes. There are hardly any layers to be observed. After observing a vertical crack running down the defence wall, we assume that the wall pos. 11.4 has been constructed for the purpose of supporting the enclosure pos. 10.4 (see also Position 10.6)

Position 11.5

In the middle of the defence wall pos. 10.4, immediately at the foot of the wall, there is a Lukhang pos. 11.5 (Fig. 20, 29). It is attached, but not interlocked, to the outer shell of the enclosure. The Lukhang measures 60×70 cm on the ground plan. The stones of the Kaymaar are coloured red. The top part of the Lukhang has been damaged by falling stones from the defence wall.

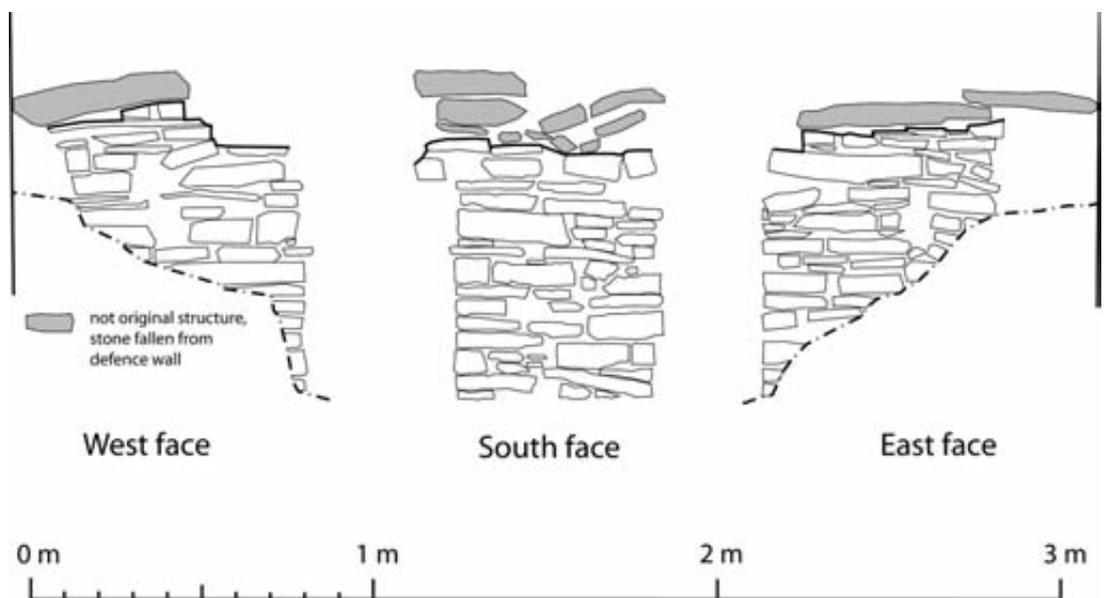


Fig. 29

Position 11.6

In the middle of the ditch there is a path that leads diagonally up the slope towards the Lukhang. On the upper side of this access to the Lukhang, the embankment is secured by a retaining wall pos. 11.6, made of small stones in irregular layers, which serves as a revetment. The wall has a maximum height of 1 m, the upper edge is collapsed due to the growth of a tree. Large parts of the wall are covered with vegetation.

Position 11.7

In the curve from east to north, the inner escarpment wall of the ditch collapsed over a length of 4.5 m (pos. 11.7).

Position 11.8

There is another revetment retaining wall pos. 11.8 in the slope between the enclosure and the ditch. It stretches approx. 12 m in length. The purpose of this wall is unknown. Further investigations are necessary to clarify this feature.

Position 11.9

In the curve from east to north, the outer escarpment wall of the ditch is covered with soil over a length of 12 m. There is a steep slope which leads to the bottom of the ditch. Since the upper edge of the slope and the continuation of the wall are at the same level, we assume that this feature is more a covered than a collapsed wall.

Position 11.10

The inner escarpment wall pos. 11.10 serves as a revetment to the slope between the ditch and the enclosure (see the description of the masonry at Position 10). It starts in the east with the collapsed part pos. 11.3 and runs to the west. There is a curve in the area of the collapsed section pos. 11.7 from where the inner escarpment wall leads precisely to the north. The overall length of the inner escarpment wall measures 74 m.

Position 11.11

Analogous to pos. 11.10, the outer escarpment wall pos. 11.11 also serves as a revetment (Fig. 26). It runs from the bridge pos. 11.2 to the curve where it was covered by soil (pos. 11.9) and continuously to the north. The first section of the wall pos. 11.11 has a length of 41 m, while the second one is 18 m long. The stones used are generally smaller than those of the inner escarpment wall pos. 11.10. In addition, natural rocks in situ were included in the wall. Due to the swelling of some parts of the outer escarpment, it may well collapse one day.

Position 11.12

The ditch pos. 11.12 continues at the eastern side of the bridge (Fig. 5, 30). From there it runs precisely towards the east down the hillside. Due to the dense jungle, it was only possible to document the eastern ditch from a short distance. Its outer escarpment wall is well preserved. In four subsequent sections and on different levels, it leads down the slope over a length of 18 m. The inner trench wall measures 4 m. Other structures were covered with soil. Further investigations are necessary to clarify this feature.

The Bailey complex Positions 12–15

On the eastern edge of the terrace there is an outer bailey complex belonging to the Obtsho Dzong which measures approx. 40 × 20 m. It lies at an altitude of approx. 2,528 m.a.s.l. Three buildings resp. rooms pos. 12–14 were documented, but it must be assumed that there are many more structures hidden in the ground (Fig. 31–34). Furthermore, from here the rediscovered access path pos. 15, which in former times connected the Punakha-Gasa footpath with the Dzong, branches off in the northeastern direction and runs down the hillside in a zig-zag line (Fig. 35).

Using the current access, we reach the Obtsho site terrace from the south. In this manner the first recognisable structure is the southern wall of the building pos. 12. In

Fig. 30 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Outer escarpment wall of the ditch/trench pos. 11.12. View to the east.

Fig. 31 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Ground floor of the building pos. 12 with massive masonry serving as a stand for oven or herd on the first floor.



30

fact this is a whole complex consisting of at least three buildings/rooms in a row. It is likely that the structure had four rooms, but only two of them are completely preserved in the ground plan (pos. 12–13). The structure, a long rectangular building, is mainly formed by two north facing walls, continuous front- and back walls, with a length of more than 20 m which are interlocked to the above-mentioned southern wall. The individual buildings are formed by partition walls which are not interlocked to the main walls. The entrance doors are located in the eastern front wall. The masonry is very similar to the brickwork of the main Dzong structures: it is a mud mortar masonry with unprocessed stones of different sizes which are mainly used as stretchers. Equally sized stones form quite regular layers. But unlike the masonry of the Dzong, small flat stones are not only used to fill the gaps, but also partly form separate layers. The height of the walls in the interior measures up to 4 m.

Position 12

The southern building pos. 12 measures 7.5 (to?) × 5 m on the inside. It is accessed via a curve shaped platform in front of the door. Towards the north there must have been a staircase of approximately 1 m height, but it is collapsed nowadays. The building pos. 12 has two floors. Against the higher-lying terrace to the west, the ground floor is dug into the ground. The partition wall to the building pos. 13 in the north, which has a



31



Fig. 32 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall of building pos. 12 and pos. 13. View to the west.

Fig. 33 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Interior of building pos. 13. View of the partition wall between the buildings pos. 12 and pos. 13.

32

thickness of 75 cm, features the holes of the beams which indicate the upper floor. On the ground floor there was a massive masonry of 1.3×1.6 m footprint (Fig. 31). It seems to be a stand for a traditional oven or herd on the first floor. Therefore we assume that the ground floor was used as a granary or store room, while the upper floor was used as a kitchen and residence. There are also the holes of wooden joists which may come from a traditional kitchen shelf with a length of approximately 3 m. There was a window measuring 50 (to?) $\times 90$ cm on the upper floor of the partition wall towards the northern building pos. 13.

Position 13

The building pos. 13 measures 6 (to?) $\times 5$ m on the inside. There is only one floor which is dug into the ground, similar to building pos. 12. The partition wall at the building pos. 12 in the south features five beam holes of a pent roof construction which was inclined to the east. Above the roof, the aforementioned window measures 50×90 cm (Fig. 33). As a suggestion, we interpret the building as a barn or a stable for horses or other domestic animals.

The continuation of the eastern and western walls indicates that the building ran to the north and there was at least one more room. But the structures were collapsed or covered with soil. Further excavations are necessary to clarify these features.



33

Fig. 34 Obtsho Dzong ruin. East face of the wall of building pos. 14. View to the west.



34

Fig. 35 Obtsho Dzong ruin. Original access path to the Obtsho terrace and the Dzong. View to the north.



35

Position 14

East of the building complex pos. 12–13 there are scanty remains of another building pos. 14. It is the lot of the southeastern corner of the building. The eastern wall has been preserved with a maximum height of 1.5 m and a length of 9 m. Its thickness measures 75 cm.

Position 15

At the eastern edge of the terrace, about 10 m before reaching the ditch, a path pos. 15 was rediscovered, which leads down the hillside in a Z-shaped line. The path was very difficult to follow due to the fact that it is covered with dense bamboo jungle. Only the first few meters were cleaned by the participants (Fig. 35). The path is about 2 m wide. In the upper section there is debris of a retaining wall on the valley side. There is no doubt that the path pos. 15 is to be regarded as the original access to the Obtsho Dzong which led to the Punakha-Gasa footpath.

4 The History of the Obtsho Family and the Dzong

Sangay Kinga, Sumjay Tshering, Tshering

4.1 Preliminary notes

The end of 12th century marked the flight and continuous visits of Tibetan religious masters predominantly in the western part of Bhutan. Their visits had a profound influence on the development of religious and cultural aspects in Bhutan. History unveils that the Tibetan religious masters were fascinated not only by the presence of pilgrimage centres of the 8th century spiritual master Guru Padmasambhava, but also in their search of local religio-political stalwarts in order to establish their monastery to continue disseminating their religions as it was unviable in Tibet, given its continuous political unrests in the 12th century⁴. By this time, as many as five schools of thoughts had arrived to firmly establish their hereditary religious lineages called *choeje* or *Zhelngo* in Bhutan. They also played a key role in spreading their religion as desired and enjoyed secular power simultaneously in their respective occupied regions. Obtsho Choeje of Goen (Gasa) was undoubtedly one of the oldest dominant figures who played a cardinal role in sowing and nursing the seed of Drukpa teachings throughout their continued religious and matrimonial ties with Drukpa masters back in Ralung, Tibet. This helped to prepare for the visit of Zhabdrung, who later on became the undisputed founding father of Palden Drukpa. Obtsho's offspring continued to play a prominent religio-political role. This has left a permanent footprint in Bhutan until this very day. In this regard, the study attempts to present the historical evolution of the Obtsho family and its significant religious and political role in the history of Bhutan.

4.2 Background of Obtsho Choeje of Gasa

The origin of the Obtsho family is unclear, but Pommaret and Darjey et al. agree that the family was once the *dema-dema* or statue-keeper of Jowo Sakyamuni going back to the 7th century AD in Lhasa⁵. Driem and Olschak recorded that it was from Dema-Dema that history noted nothing, but later on, an ethnic group carrying the name Demai Dema – the Denma Tshemang – one of the the highly accomplished calligraphers and closest disciples of Guru Padma Sambhava, came alive⁶. Due to the karmic connection, Rinchen Drakpa became an ardent disciple of Denma Tshemang and implemented all precepts under his guidance, for which he later proudly carried the epithet *geshi Tathangpa*. It was from him – Pelden Drukpa Rinpoche Tshangpa Gyar Drukpa (1661–1221), the founder of the Kaguyud Order – that he received his first hair-cutting ceremony and was empowered with his unfathomable esoteric teachings. Later on – in order to continue his pedigree – he married a holy woman from the Khyung clan and gave birth to his spiritual son Norbu Palden who later became an ardent and highly acclaimed disciple of Tsang pa Gyarey in Tibet. However, as prophesised by his master-father to visit the southern land (Bhutan) and as destiny would have it, the people of Laya and Goen (Gasa) invited him to Bhutan. After his arrival, he meditated at Gomo Terkhung Cave (site at the current Gasa Dzong). Given his spiritual accomplishment, he was then named as Terkhung pa («one from the treasure cave»). In addition, history records that he did in fact subdue a demon named *sgo bdud chen po*, who was transformed into a protective deity of the locality and became one of his servants. In fact, the wrathful statue of *sgo bdud chen po*, is permanently enshrined in the sacred chapel «goenkhang» in Gasa Dzong and continues to prevail as the local deity.

Dargay et al. and Pommeret also agree that after his arrival in Gasa, Rinchen Drakpa Palden alias Terkhungpa founded the monastery at Obtsho at an unknown date. Ardussi however suggested that the foundation would have taken place soon after the death of his tutor Tshang pa Gyarey at around 1212–1214 AD⁷. From then on, the studies echoed that his successive nephews (Tibetan model of inheriting the seat) continued to immortalise the blessings and teachings of the Drukpa masters in Bhutan.

⁴ Details in Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008.

⁵ Pommaret 1989; Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008.

⁶ Dream 1998, reproduced in Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008, p. 51 and Olschak, 1979, reproduced in Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008, pp. 198–215.

⁷ Ardussi 2000, reproduced in Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008, p. 2.

4.3 Nomenclature of Obtsho in the context of Bhutan

The term «Obtsho» has different meanings. Dargay et al. (2008) maintain that the term Qbs-mtsho may mean «the fire foundation would have taken place soon after the death of pit Lake» (among others known from the standard description of «hell» in Buddhist literature), or that it may arguably be COITupt? ((???) for 'O.ma'l mtsho ((???) or «Milk Lake». However, the key informants are completely unaware of such names, but they continue to uphold the name of the ruin as O Be (?) Dzong. In addition, the locals equally claim that a small lake does exist approximately 4 km towards the north of the current ruin. Therefore, it is highly probable that the name «obtsho» was even based on the existence of the lake, although it is not certain to which degree the colour of the lake resembles «Ob», i.e. milk. But Ardussi (2000) argues that Obtsho has no origin.

Geographically, the Obtsho ruin is nested on the imposing hill above the Gasapunakha highway. It takes almost an hour's walk before reaching Gasadzong. History noted that it used to be the seat of dominant Obtsho offspring, including the highly respected Drukpa master grubthob gTer (???) Khungpa until the 17th century. Today, only the distorted and probable remains of the Utse, administrative blocks and the distinct defence wall with shooting slits can be seen. Currently, the Department of Culture under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs in collaboration with SLSA, Switzerland – assisted by a few cultural officers and a lecturer – is therefore underway to complete the archaeological survey in order to document, protect and ensure the longevity of the fast waning values of this historically rich archaeological remains.

4.4 The role of the Obtsho Lama throughout the political and religious history of Bhutan

Religiously and politically, Obtsho Lama (?) and his descendents played a pivotal role in preparing and shaping the religio-political history of Bhutan. Dargay et al. noted that the Obtsho of Gasadzong was one of the foremost chöjés that continued to uphold and spread their aboriginal Drukpa teachings in the foreign land by means of their strong and continued religio-matrimonial ties with the ruling Gya clan of Ralung ever since the 13th century⁸. Since that period in time, the Obtsho family enjoyed the luxury of both spiritual cum temporal power in the area and continue to eternalise the religion. Thus, by the end of the 16th century, the obtsho chöje, like other schools of thoughts in Bhutan, continued to propagate their religion and prepared a conducive place for the birth of the *Drukpa Kagud*, the state religion in its truest sense under the theocratic yoke of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651) in 1616 AD.

Coincidentally at this point in time, blessed by the indigenous religio-political events of uneasiness and by the visions of Zhabdrung such as Zhabdrung's unresolved religious disputes with Tsang Desi Phiintshog Namgyel (1597–1621) over the issue of the reincarnation of Kuenkhen Pema Karpo, the cordial invitation from Obtsho Lama (?) from Goen to visit the southern land «Lho Mon» with the letter where there is «... no laws for the people, [a situation resembling] a pot without a handle ...» at some point in time in the early 17th century⁹. Thus, this all determined the flight of the destined Zhabdrung to Bhutan. The records show that the Zhabdrung accepted the offer and, escorted by the Obtsho Lama, fled towards the South [Bhutan]. On arrival, he was ceremonially welcomed by the family members of the Obtsho *chöje* as well as by others. On a larger scale, Zhabdrung's flight to Bhutan proved to be a turning point, a landmark event and the birth-hour of the new nation state which was to be known as <*Drukgyul*>.

In addition, Tenzin Drukgye (1591–1656), the first Druk Desi of Bhutan – also the contemporary of Zhabdrung – who was probably believed to be the man backing Zhabdrung's invitation to Bhutan, hails from the Obtsho family. According to Dargay et al. Tenzin Drukgye was for the first time ever enrolled as the novice monk who later perfected the precepts of all Drukpa under the guidance of his venerable Tempai Nima,

⁸ Dargay, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008.

⁹ Dargay, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008, p. 15; Pommaré 1989.

the father of Zhabdrung in Ralung in Tibet and continued to render his selfless service both as <treasurer> (*chagdzd, phyag mdzod*) and as precentor or chanting master (*umze, dbu mdzad*) – responsible for civil as much as for ecclesiastical matters, which then groomed him to guide Bhutan soon after the permanent retreat of the unifier of Bhutan in 1651. In addition, Dargey et al. (2008, chapter II, p. 31) noted that Jamgon alias Ngawang Gyaltshen – considered an emanation of the future Buddha Maitreya-natha – was born into the old aristocratic family of Obtsho in the «Female-Fire-Pig Year», corresponding to 1647, in Sharidrak: of Gon Amorimu, and brought about a profound change in the religious art and architectures of Bhutan¹⁰.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, even though not much is known about Obtsho, history records that Obtsho choeje was one of the oldest choejes in Bhutan. In fact, they are well credited for sowing and nursing the seeds of Drukpa Kagyud in pre-Zhabdrung's rule over Bhutan. They maintained religious and matrimonial alliances with Ralung, Tibet. Therefore, an immeasurable gratitude is due to them for preparing the visit of Zhabdrung and for their subsequent political development in Bhutan. The current Obtsho ruin was once a flourishing seat of Drupthob Terkhngpa, suggested to have been founded in the early 12th century AD. It was believed to have come into effect by the outbreak of the epidemic which cost the lives of many inhabitants in the area. As a result, based on the signs of (an) omen, the Dzong is said to have been abandoned in order to be able to build on the site meditated by Drupthob Terkungpa – the current site where Gasa Dzong now stands.

5 Bibliography

- POMMARET, F. (1989). *The Obtsho Choejes of Gasa*. From: History of Bhutan. Ministry of Education, Bhutan (unpublished).
- YONTEN, D., SORENSEN, P.K. and TSHERING, G. (2008). *The Play of the Omniscient. Life and Works of Jamgön Ngawang Gyaltshen. An Eminent 17–18th Century Drukpa Master*. Kuensel Co. Ltd. Bhutan.

¹⁰ Dargye, Sorensen and Tshering, 2008, p. 31.