

## A conservation study of rMe ru rnying pa monastery, Lhasa

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In 1999–2000, the international NGO Tibet Heritage Fund restored the ninth century rMe ru rnying pa monastery in Lhasa in cooperation with the Lhasa City Cultural Relics Office. During that time, unrestricted access enabled us to carry out a comprehensive study (including surveys and structural investigations) vital for the formulation of the conservation activities. Due to the peculiar circumstances, the actual work had to begin almost simultaneously with the study, but that enabled us to look inside opened walls and opened roofs and underneath successive layers of wall paintings and plaster. Comparisons could also be made with a number of other historic monasteries in Lhasa that were studied during the same period, such as the Lhasa Jokhang and Tengyeling, looking at wall paintings, spatial organisation and functionality, construction materials and how a respective site is functioning within the local community. All data gathered has now been processed, the surveys are drawn up, and Tibetan sources were consulted to establish a building chronology.

This study has greatly increased our knowledge about traditional Tibetan timber and stone architecture, and helped to develop a systematic conservation and rehabilitation approach for historic Tibetan buildings. The study shows that in order to gain a proper understanding of a Tibetan monument, it is not enough to only look at the sources without visiting the building, nor to only judge by stylistic criteria without consulting all available sources. Founding dates of several of the sites surveyed had to be repeatedly corrected when we were confronted with contradictory information.

The current construction boom in Tibet makes comprehensive study and documentation of historic sites an urgent priority, as commercial redevelopment may deprive us from gathering enough data to one day better understand and appreciate the most important historic developments in Tibetan architecture and decorative arts, and their relation with social conditions and religious practice of the past.