



*The Lost Kingdom Of Guge*  
*On the Footsteps of Giuseppe Tucci*

## **GUGE**

The civilization of Guge flourished between the X-XI century from a more ancient kingdom, the mysterious empire of Shangshung. According to Giuseppe Tucci, this was the first settlement of Tibet, whose origin he made back about 3000 years ago. The traces of this world are fleeting, we find few references in the texts, such as the minutes of travel reported by A. Govinda in "The Way of the white clouds." Some interesting research has been conducted by Lama Norbu Namkai suggested that in this realm the origins of the esoteric teachings of Bön and Dzogchen, which is the most ancient Tibetan traditions. Guge was the protagonist of the flowering of major Tibetan monastic schools between the X and XI century. During its lifetime the Guge Kingdom played an important part in the economic and cultural development of Tibet. The kingdom advocated Buddhism, and many versions of this religion were created here and their teachings were spread from here into the heart of Tibet.



The artistic history of Guge is strictly connected with Rinchen Zangpo a key figure of the himalayan history. He was a monk known as the Lotsava (translator) that translated several books from the sanskrit and during his lifetime built 108 temples. Still today most of these temples are well known to the world because of their fine art and architecture work. The blend of Indian(Kashmiri) and Tibetan art in the temples of Alchi in Ladakh; Tabo, Kungri and Lhalung in Spiti is the evidence of the profound and sophisticated culture that reached its peak in the capitals of Guge: Toling and Tsaparang. We do know that the king of Guge was wealthy enough to be able to import artisans from regions like Kashmir. But while the style may be Kashmiri, it is also distinctly Tibetan. Some of the most captivating frescos, statues and stuccos of the Guge temples have survived even to the Chinese cultural revolution and have been described and shown to the world by Giuseppe Tucci that discovered the Guge ruins during the '30.

Tucci was among the handful of privileged Westerners to see the site in its pre-Chinese days. He noted 'an art peculiar to Guge, distinctive in itself and independent of the art movements in other parts of Tibet.' He left a detailed description of the artwork in its more intact state—particularly the statuary. Guge seems to have escaped plundering by Western treasure seekers and museum collectors, but not so the Chinese. In the mid-1960s, Red Guards ran amok and trashed the temples of Guge—smashing precious statuary in their wake—but miraculously, the murals were left largely unscathed. The temples suffered some water damage, but since this is a desert area, things are kept freeze-dried, naturally. It's an odd juxtaposition of clay ruins, destroyed statuary, but intact murals on the temple walls.



..the wonderful activity of the venerable apostle (Rinchen Zangpo) and the enlightened liberality of the kings of Gu-ge, who, inviting from India the most illustrious masters of their time, as it were transplanted into Tibet the doctrines and practices of the Mahayana. It is with a sense of profound reverence that we visit this temple, from which a crowd, today almost unknown, of thinkers and ascetics shed over the whole of Tibet a spiritual light which is not yet extinguished.

Giuseppe Tucci, 1935



Guge was founded in the 9th century and it was the political and cultural focus for all western Tibet. The power and prosperity of the Guge Kingdom was felt far and wide and in 1624 the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Andrade went there searching for the legendary Prester John. Sited on a minor trade route linking Tibet with Kashmir and India the twin towns of Tholing and Tsaparang thrived until the 17th century when invading Muslim forces overcame the defenses and massacred the population. From the 1680s until the early 20th Century the region was largely deserted, with its great history and cultural treasures forgotten and undisturbed. Guge remains historically important as the repository of an otherwise vanished artistic style and the source from which an invigorated Buddhist faith spread its light over Tibet.



In 1949, Lama Govinda so describes the city of Tsaparang in his book *“The Way of the White Clouds”*,

The work of man and the work of nature have become almost indistinguishable. The ruins have taken the form of rocks, and rocks stand out like Cyclopean buildings. The whole huge mountain looks like one huge block of marble, out of which a fairy city has been carved, with lofty castles, towers, and turrets which seem to touch the clouds, with mighty walls and battlements on perpendicular rocks, which on their part are honeycombed with hundreds and hundreds of caves.

*“When we set eyes on the lofty castles of the ancient city of Tsaparang, which seemed to be carved out of the solid rock of an isolated monolithic mountain peak, we gasped with wonder and could hardly believe our eyes... In the great solitude and stillness of the abandoned city and in the mysterious semi-darkness of its temple-halls, the spiritual experiences and achievements of countless generations seemed to be projected into the magic forms of images. The temples seemed to be lifted out of the stream of time...”*

# Giuseppe Tucci

<http://www.giuseppetucci.isiao.it>.



Giuseppe Tucci is one of the greatest names in Tibetan studies. After graduating, he traveled to India where he studied Buddhism, tibetan and bengali and also taught Italian and Chinese. In 1933 he founded the *Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente* (ISMEO) that is still active and include in its collections a large number of objects and photos that he brought back from his expeditions. He made extended visits to Tibet: between 1927 and 1948 he visited Tibet and the contiguous Himalayan kingdoms no less than eight times. He combined in himself the qualities of the explorer, naturalist and scholar. In *Tibet, Land of Snows* he describes his impressions of both the landscape and the culture in rhapsodic prose: Only those who have been in Tibet know the fascination of its huge landscapes, its diaphanous air that scarfs the icy peaks with turquoise, its vast silence that at once humbles man and uplifts him.





As he wrote in several occasions the Western Tibet was his favourite region and his first two expeditions (1933 and 1935) were focused on this region that in the old times was the hearth of the Guge Kingdom. He was the first westerner to visit this area in the last century and the pictures shot by Eugenio Ghersi (Photographer of the expedition) represent the oldest documentation of this part of Himalaya. Moreover the results of these expeditions represent the body of 5 of the 7 books of one of the best books written by Giuseppe Tucci: *Indo-Tibetica*.

## THE NEW REPORTAGE

by Luigi Vigliotti

The reportage that I am proposing is focused on these two expeditions following Giuseppe Tucci's footsteps on the track of the *Lost Kingdom of Guge*. The chronicle of the first expedition dating back to 1933 was even translated in English and I enclose a pdf of the book (*Secrets of Tibet*) so you can get a better idea of the story. Please note that the region of Old Guge is today split between India and China and it is a remote area. I certainly did not have the time that usually allows to the National Geographic photographers to shoot the pictures that we see on the magazine.



The whole story is the result of four expeditions carried out in different years including the special occasion of the 1000 years anniversary of the foundation of the Tabo monastery. That celebration gave to me the possibility to shot pictures of the local people dressing their best clothes to onorate the presence of the Dalai Lama in the region. The area is mostly deserted and it is very difficult for a photographer to catch images of people dressing in such a way. Moreover it is forbidden to shot pictures in most of the temples of the region and I am very lucky to have the opportunity to include in my selection photos of frescos and stutue of these monasteries. The old pictures shot during the Tucci expeditions have been recently digitalized and are available at the ISMEO in Rome.

Luigi Vigliotti  
Viale Angelo Masini 46  
40126 BOLOGNA - ITALY