

Book Review

Review of *Historical Sites of Changthang, Leh, Ladakh* by Quentin Devers

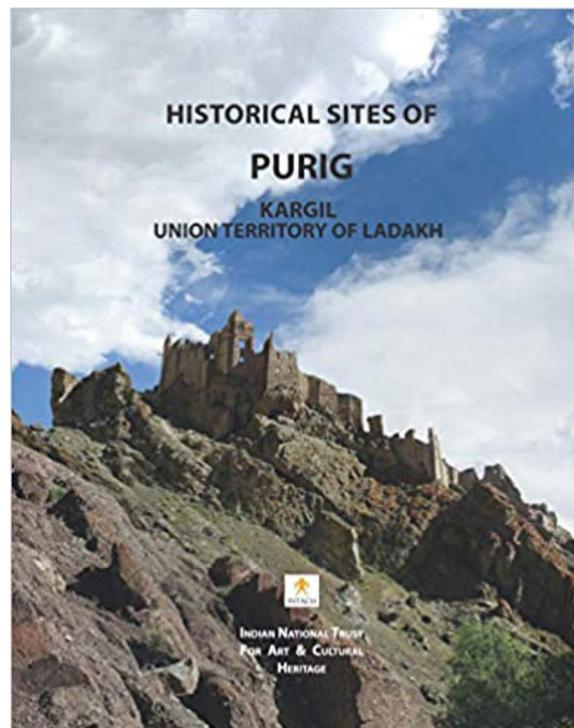
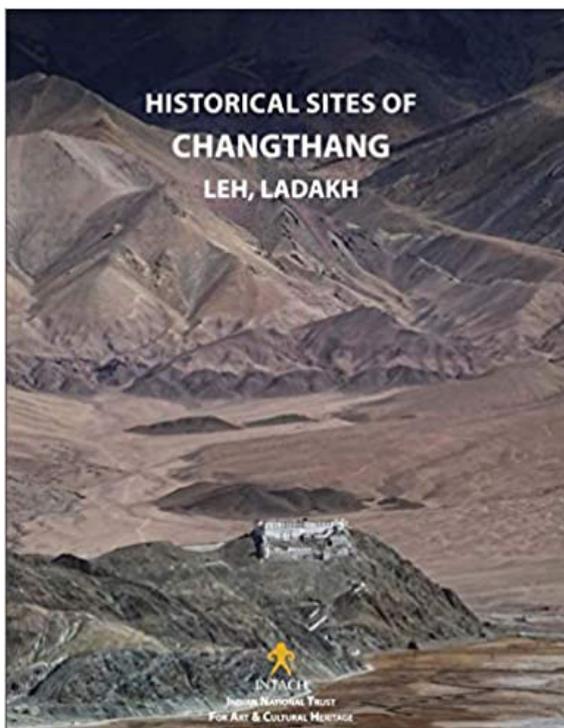
New Delhi: INTACH, 2019. 253 pages. ISBN 9798550322055

Review of *Historical Sites of Purig, Kargil, Union Territory of Ladakh* by Quentin Devers

New Delhi: INTACH, 2020. 196 p. ISBN 9798550807101

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We owe Kacho Mumtaz Ali Khan, co-convenor of the Ladakh chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH), the initiative of these two exquisite volumes. The idea was to create a comprehensive documentation of historical sites of Ladakh. Two volumes have already been published (Purig and Changthang), and four more are being expected (Zangskar, Nubra, Lower Ladakh, and Upper Ladakh).

“These volumes are the first attempt at a comprehensive inventory and initial assessment of the heritage of the region.”

- Patrick Kaplanian on *Historical Sites of Purig and Historical Sites of Changthang*

Ladakh is not at all a uniform region. The areas documented in Dever’s first two volumes are very different. Purig is the westernmost part of Ladakh, and it is separated from Kashmir by the Great Himalayan Range. Purig is an area of lower altitude than the rest of Ladakh, the average being less than 2,700 meter (or 5,000 feet). It covers 7,000 square kilometers (or about 2,700 square miles). Population density now comprises 18 inhabitants per square kilometer. This area is Muslim dominated, who follow Twelver Shi’ism, the largest branch of Shia Islam, with a few Sunni pockets and several Buddhist villages in Purig’s eastern valleys.

Changthang is the easternmost region of Ladakh. It consists of a high plateau with an average altitude above 4,000 meter (or 12,000 feet). Winters are extremely cold, with temperatures often dropping below 30° Celsius (or 22° Fahrenheit). Changthang represents about 36% of the territory of Ladakh, a figure that goes up to 48% when including the Upper Shyog valley, also studied in this volume. According to the 2011 census, the Changthang population comprised 6% of the population of Ladakh, and the density in the five main sub-regions is 0.7 inhabitants per square kilometer, a

figure that goes down to 0.5 inhabitants when adding the Upper Shyog valley. By comparison, Purig, with about only 10% of Ladakh’s territory, shelters around half the population of Ladakh, for a density of 18 inhabitants per square kilometer. Changtang’s population is Buddhist, with many inhabitants leading a semi-nomadic lifestyle, breeding yaks and the famous pashmina goat.

The Purig volume includes 258 historical sites, out of which only 60 had been published on before. As far as the Changthang volume is concerned, 255 sites are documented, which is a lot for an area so scarcely

populated, and probably a hint at the aridification and desertification process Changthang, on both sides of the border, has gone through over the past centuries and perhaps even millennia. Among the 255 sites of Changtang, about 80 have been previously published on. To sum up, the extensive surveys behind the first two volumes of this series enabled the discovery of nearly 380 previously unknown historical sites. The documentation of this corpus represents about 1,500 kilometers of tracks covered on foot and another 9,000 kilometers driven across the mountains of Ladakh.

The goal of each volume is to list heritage sites that contribute to understanding the history of Ladakh. Every fortification, temple/monastery (intact or in ruins), petroglyph, pictograph, cave complex, meditation place, and abandoned mine, and, in the case of Purig, also every mosque (*masjid*) and tomb of a saint (*khanaka*) over a hundred years old, is mentioned. When it comes to Buddhist carvings and *chorten* (both painted and regular), mostly those from up to the 15th century are included.

Each site is described along with at least one good color picture. The volume on Changthang incorporates additional full-size pictures of the most important sites, based

on feedback received from the first volume for Purig. The age of remains is tentatively assessed, when possible, based on their material reality, not on what oral tradition states. As the author reminds us in the introductions to both volumes, archaeological and historical research in Ladakh is only at its very beginnings, as we lack ample data for almost every period of the history of the region—no extensive radiocarbon dating or excavations have ever been conducted. These volumes are the first attempt at a comprehensive inventory and initial assessment of the heritage of the region.

To evaluate the different heritage sites the author provides various grades, each from A to D. There are different grades from archaeological, architectural, and historical points of view and, in some cases, from a social/cultural perspective. They are followed by a final grading that follows a different scale: I, IIA, IIB, and III. The state of conservation is also mentioned. For the fortifications the author added a ‘defense grade’, from one to four stars, to evaluate the strengths of their defenses factoring in their architecture, use of topography, and

defensive features. The inventories have a section entitled “Further Readings” for some of the sites. They present books and articles that remind us of complementary descriptions already published and of different points of view. All this is completed by a series of good and detailed maps.

It is too early to draw important conclusions about the early history of Ladakh. But we can already notice some important points. For instance, we now know that Kushan or post-Kushan sites have existed in Purig, and protohistorical fortifications, which are outlets of commercial routes, are an integral part of Changthang. Two of those routes in Purig come from Kashmir (Dras and Panikkar) and one in Changthang comes from the Tarim Basin (Tangtse).

Overall, the book series is a very useful work for both scholars and students that sheds light on a hitherto obscure era of Ladakh’s history.

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