

Mustang where civilization flourished

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Abstract

Mustang is one of the Trans-Himalayan districts of western Nepal, famous for its biodiversity, geology, prehistoric caves and cultural uniqueness. Geographically, it is divided into Upper and Lower Mustang. The area north of Kagbeni is Upper Mustang or Lo-Tsho Dun which consists Lomanthang, Charang, Dhee, Surkhang, Yara Ghara, Tangya, Dhey, Ghemi, Dhakmar, Marang, Ghiling, Chonup and Chhoser and south area of Kagbeni is called Serib (Bara Gaun) which consists of Lupra, Kagbeni, Khinga, Jharkot, Muktinath, Dzong, Tangbe, Chhuksang, Tetang, Tsaille, Ghyakar, Samar. In the south is the area of Thak Saatsae, which literally means seven hundred houses, which comprised of the villages of Ghasa, Lete, Kalopani, Taglung, Kunjo, Larjung, Kobang, Naurikot, Khanti, Tukuche. Culturally, this area is dominated by the Thakalis. The Panch Gaun is comprised of Chimang, Chaira, Marpha, Syang and Thini. The Kaligandaki River flows from the Tibetan Plateau, cutting through Himalayas and ends up flowing into the Ganges of northern India. While flowing between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs, the Kaligandaki forms the deepest river valley in the world. It is the only river where Shaligram or ammonite is found. Ammonite is considered as a fossil of the Tethys Sea. Mustang was a famous salt route through north to south trade. There are many abandoned settlement ruins like Ghemi, where exploration and excavation is necessary.

Keywords : Biodiversity, prehistoric caves, cultural uniqueness, Lo-Tsho Dun, Serib (Bara Gaun), Tibetan Plateau, massifs, ammonite, fossil, Tethys Sea & Petroglyphs

Objective of the study

The main objective of study is to focus on important heritages and prehistoric caves of Mustang. Mustang is an amazing place where we find numerous prehistoric caves dated to 8th century B.C. It was the trade route between North, South and Central Asia from the beginning. Mustang is very famous for splendour monastery and wall paintings. It is the sacred place where earth, fire and sky meet and religion like Bonpo, Buddhist and Hindu turned into harmony.

Methodology

This article has been prepared on the basis of field visit, information collected from excavation report and the secondary sources. Data has been used explanatory and analytical.

Geography

Mustang is situated between 28°36' N and 29°19' N and between 83°28' E and 84°8' E in northwestern Nepal at an altitude of 3,781 m. The name used most commonly outside the

region itself is Mustang, a deviant pronunciation of Manthang. It is called Lo by its inhabitants, the Lopas. Surrounded by Tibet on three sides and bounded by snow-capped mountains in the east and west, it is shielded from rainfall, and so has an arid climate. Consequently, it has very little arable land, most of the soil being composed of a loose conglomerate of rounded pebbles and sand. Agriculture, animal husbandry and trade have been the main sources of livelihood in Lo since ancient times, but now tourism is also becoming a major component of the local economy. Jomsom is the capital of Mustang District.

History

Lomanthang's early history is bound up with the western province of Ngari in Tibet. The region is mentioned in the Chronicles of Ladakh from the time of SrongBtsansGampoin the 7th century A.D. Several monuments, such as Ghami's Mani wall (240 m long), Dakmar and Ghar Gumba of Lo Gekar in Upper Mustang, have kept the legendary history of Padmasambhav alive. GharGumba of Lo Gekar is believed to be a monastery built at the same time as Samye Gumba in Tibet, namely in the 8th century A.D. Likewise, the famous Indian teacher Atiśa visited Lo en route to Tibet in the 10th century A.D.

The first king of Lomanthang was Amadpal, who was born in 1387 A.D. He built the wall around the settlement of Lo in the second half of the 15th century A.D. He also built the four-storey palace in 1440 A.D. Mustang was under the influence of Jumla in the 16th and 18th centuries A.D. When Jumla was annexed to Nepal in 1789 A.D, Mustang also became an integral part of the country but its king was recognized as a local king. The former king, JigmePalbarBista, was believed to be the 21th descendant of King Amadpal who died recently. Mustang is the most promising area in Nepal for archaeological view. Muktinath is very sacred and religious place where earth, fire and water integrate. Lupra is the centre of the Bon religion, which is still in existence. Lupra is home to the only Bon school as well as two monasteries, one high on the hill which is newly built, and another gorgeous one down in the village, which was founded in 1200 A.D. Japanese Monk Ekai Kawaguchi was the first traveller who stayed in Tukuiche in 1899 A.D. and also travelled to Muktinath and Charang.

Lomanthang is unique in virtue of its architecture, art, history, culture, religion, archaeology and festivals. It is the only intact medieval fort located in Nepal. It can thus be classified as a monument of international importance. Therefore, the Government of Nepal has enlisted it as a tentative world heritage monument. Recently, it has also declared it cultural site linking to silk route, but let's hope road will not affect the surrounding and environment of marvelous and glorious heritages of Mustang.

Some Important Heritages

Jhyampa Monastery

Jhyampa Gumba is the oldest monastery inside the walled settlement. Built by AmgonBzangpoin 1447, it was restored by Bsam Grub Dpal Bar in 1663. It is a three-storey monastery made of clay, stone and wood. There is a circumambulatory path around

the sanctum. The walls bordering the path contain paintings. The doorframe of the sanctum has a carved Chepū above it. The sanctum itself features ten wooden pillars set on attractive earthen pedestals inscribed with Ranjana script. The huge figure of Jhyampa (Maitreya, the future Buddha) in the second storey is strikingly beautiful. There are sculptures, too, of DorjeSemba and the Buddha, along with three wooden *chörtens*. The interior walls of the second and third storey contain more than 100 painted mandalas. It is not an exaggeration to say that this monastery is a treasury of wall paintings. Restoration work of the monastery has been accomplished now.

Thubchen Monastery

The second most important monastery in the walled settlement of Lomanthang bears the name Thubchen. Constructed in stone, clay and wood, it is 37.20 m. long, 24 m. wide and 12 m. high. The door of the main entrance, facing east, is beautifully carved, with the upper part of the doorframe containing Ranjana script, above which, is a row of six lion heads. Inside the main entrance there are huge earthen statues of Dhvajarāja (Vaiśrāvaṇa) and Viṇārāja (Dhṛtarāṣṭra) to the north, and Khadgarāja (Virūdhaka) and Caityarāja (Virūpakṣa) to the south. There is another carved door leading into the sanctum. The main pillared hall is astonishingly large. There are only 35 pillars now, but evidence shows that there were originally 42. The northern wall was at some point shifted inward, which required the loss of seven pillars. The central ceiling is raised high towards a skylight, which is bounded by a square of 36 lion heads in the projecting joists. According to one available document, the northern wall was rebuilt in 1815 by Padma Bhuti.

The walls of the monastery have gold-encrusted paintings depicting the peaceful postures of the Buddha. The eastern wall of the sanctum has six large images featuring the peaceful postures of the Buddha, with a thousand small Buddhas around him and the Vairocana Buddha in the gesture of the mudra of setting the *dharmacakra* in motion in the middle of the row. Among the images, two bear captions in Tibetan script. There are eight paintings of the Buddha on the southern wall and one on the western wall, behind the NamgyalChörten. Two figures in the act of lifting the Buddha in asana are quite interesting, showing as they do the influence of Chinese art. These paintings are original and, according to a *molla*, date back to the 15th century. The paintings on the (rebuilt) northern wall, though, only go back to the 19th century. One of the 19th-century paintings of Mahākāla was detached while repair work was being done on the wall at the western side of the northern corner. The (untouched) northern wall (5.40 m. long), however, still has two original wall paintings.

On an earthen platform at the western sanctum are figures of NamgyalChörten, KhadchheriLokeśvara, Thubchen (Śākyamuni Buddha), Mañjuśrī and Padmasambhava with his two consorts. In front of these sculptures are Vajradhara, Padmasambhava with his two consorts, Aparamita and Hayagrīva. All these sculptures except for the copper Thubchen were fashioned in clay.

The Palace

The palace was constructed in mud, stone and wood, and counts nine corners. It boasts of both wall paintings and Ranjana inscriptions. The main entrance to the palace faces east. It has been coated with a white layer of lime. The palace has a valuable collection of texts, including the Kanjur, Tenjur, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā* and *Śatasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā*.

Choedye Monastery

Choedye monastery was built by Tashi Goyen in the 15th century. The monastery continues to house practising monks. Valuable sculptures, books, thankas and masks belonging to the Jhyampa and Thubchen monasteries are kept there for security. The famous traditional Tiji festival is conducted every year by the monks there.

The Lomanthang Wall

The wall around Lomanthang was built by A Ma Dpal, the first king of Lomanthang, in 1440. It is 1.5 m. thick at the base. The base consists of large uncut and unmortared stones. Over this base lie blocks of *gyang* (beaten clay, 40 cm wide, 50 cm high and 3 m. long) tapered at the top. *Pop* bricks (of clay, 42 cm by 13 cm by 21 cm) were introduced during later repair work. The height of the wall is 8.55 m. Parallel to the wall is a stone walkway (60-70 cm wide) situated 75-80 cm below the top of the wall, allowing one to along the wall through around the town. The wall surrounding Lomanthang has five corners, each accompanied by several bastions (*zhong*). The average height of a bastion is 10 m. The wall runs 270 m. along the west side and 153 m. along the south in an L shape. It is 59 m. shorter in the north than in the south, and encloses 3.51 hectares (68.87 ropanis). The main entrance through the wall lies in the north. It is 3 m. wide and 5 m. high. It is the only sizeable entrance into the fortress, even though now many additional openings in the wall have opened up.

Importance of the Wall

Lomanthang is the only walled city in Nepal. Its first ruler built the wall around his palace with the idea from the beginning that it would turn the city into a fortress and so protect its inhabitants. Currently 175 residences and 1,009 inhabitants are recorded as living within the city. The most significant monuments inside the wall are three red monasteries, the white palace, twelve *chörtens* and a mani wall. Lomanthang is divided into two parts: the southern part, centre on the palace surrounded by white-washed residences, and the northern part, containing the red monasteries. The settlement is also divided into four areas, each named after a god or goddess. The north-eastern (Iśāna) section is named after VajraSādhuMahākāla, and is also called Gunthang. The south-eastern (Agneya) section is named after Dolma, being called Dolma Laxhang. The south-western (Nairṛtya) section is named after Chenresi (i.e. Avalokiteśvara) and is also called Potaling, and the north-western (Vāyavya) section is named after Jhyampa, and is also called Jhyathang. Lomanthang has only one entrance, in the north. Now people have come

to view the wall as a hindrance to the free access to their plots and fields outside the wall. This city is also famous for being a mud city.

Lo Ghekar

It is the most important monastery of Lo Tsho Dun because it is the only common monastery and Nyingmapa sect of Lo Tsho Dun. Amapal built the palace of Tsarang and monastery near the Lo Ghekar because it was subdued by Padmasambhav over Dakini (demon). It was renovated by King Don Grub Dorje (1580-1594 AD). The monastery has Chortens in its four corners. Beside it there are believed to be 108 Chortens, some have been already renovated. The main entrance has paintings of Chaturmaharaja. There is two part of Dukhang, the older inner one and the newer outer one. Carvings on slates images are kept in outer Dukhang. The upper storey has sculpture of Padmasambhav, Lama and Mahankal. The room called Mani Lhakang has Mani-Padma Lokeshwor, which was donated by Queen Nyizla in 17th century AD. In 2038 B.S., it was repaired and restored jointly by King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation and American Himalaya Foundation.

Charang Palace

This palace was built by Aham Don Grub Dorje during his reign in 1580-1594 AD. But the evidences show that the palace already existed. King Don Grub Dorje might have extended or rebuilt it. The palace is five-storey constructed by mud, stone, and wood. It is a grand structure standing still with past glorious history. The palace has main entrance on the South. A stone near it, said to be from Jumla, is interesting. The first storey has toilet, rooms and Chorten. The second storey has weapons, sculptures of Maitreya, Tara, Chorten (gold plated), Lokeshwor (wooden), copper Astadal, box, Astasahsrikapragyaparmita with gold letter and carving wooden cover, a human hand and six sculptures made of clay. The third and fourth have rooms only. The Eastern part of the palace has turned into ruin now.

Charang Monastery

The first independent king, Amapal, built his palace at Lomanthang but he sponsored the founding of the new Thub-bstan bshad-grub dar-rgyas gling monastery in Lo's old headquarters, Charang, which has remained Lo's most active religious and educational center since the time of its independence. The present monastery was built by Bsum Grub Dorje in the 16th century AD. It is three storey constructed by mud, stone, and wood. There is **Ani Gumba**, which is abandoned and deserted but its paintings seem to be the oldest in the monastery. It also needs to be restored and conserved urgently..

Namgyal Monastery

It is one of the important monasteries of Lomanthang which was renovated by Ngorchen Kunga Sangpo in 1427 A.D. But, according to Garphu Molla, it was built by Agoyen Sangpo in 1447 A.D. The new monastery was built by Tashi Goyen in 1512 A.D. The two-storey outer structure with red and white strip is very attractive and can be

noticed from a far away distance. Many valuable sculptures, paintings, books and thankas are collected here.

Luri Cave

The Luri cave is just half an hour's walk beyond the Tashe Kabung (cave chorten). Located in Ghara Village (Ward 6 Surkhang V.D.C.), it is the only accessible cave chorten in Upper Mustang. Luri monastery is currently in a state of ruin. There are five chortens and mani wall along the ascent to it. It is built above the hill cave. The trail up is narrow and a wooden bridge spans a crevasse of mud, grit and stones. The main entrance has a wooden door. The cave has four storeys.

The Chorten has long been renowned for its beautiful paintings dating from the 13th–14th century A.D. Its socle exhibits the eight auspicious symbols along with four guardian deities. The womb contains paintings of Namgyal, Khadcheri, Vajrasattva and Lokesvara on its eastern, western, northern and southern sides, respectively. The west wall of the cave offers images of Monk, The Buddha with Sariputra and Maudgalyana, Vajradhar, Vajrasattva and Khadgayogini. Likewise, beautiful paintings of eight siddhas and a mandala look down from the cave ceiling upon the chorten.

Tangye Group of Chortens

Tangye village comprises of wards 7/8 of Surkhang V.D.C. It is famous for a group of chortens and numerous caves. A Kabung was discovered in a cliff some 15 minutes away from the village. It is well preserved and, indeed, wholly intact. No paintings were found in the cave, only the chorten which has a Ranjana inscription on it.

Kagbeni

Kagbeni, meaning confluence of rivers, has a monastery at the point where the rivers meet. Kagbeni's environmental features show that it is a dry high mountain region inhabited by Tibetan speaking population. It is located along one of the most important historic trade routes of Nepal. It is a sacred place where Hindus come for Shradha. It has a fortress city which was subjugated by Jumla. This city is the main entrance to Lomanthang.

Festivals

Lomanthang is famous for its cultural festivals also. Following are some important list of festivals celebrated in Lomanthang:

1. Tiji (religious) – an occasion of celebration for the overcoming of demons. Accompanied by a traditional dance of the Monks.
2. Lhosar (historic) – New Year's celebrations in the month of Phāgun, still prevalent.
3. Yartung (historic) – The Lamas of Choedye feast and enjoy riding horses in the month of Bhadra.
4. Phangi Dhajyang (religious) – for the digestive system. A feast for younger coevals during the rainy season.

5. Shaka Lhuka (religious) – for the sake of a good harvest, a worship ceremony is performed before seeds are sown in fields.
6. Shaka Dhawa (cultural) – Surkhang V.D.C. (all the villagers) paint the monasteries and *chörtens* and organize *pūjās* (acts of worship) for Nyune.

The identity of Lomanthang is primarily based on the fact that it is a medieval walled city which is still, to a large degree, intact. This should be seen as a cultural heritage of world value. Not only are the settlement and cultural heritages of the walled city important but so is the path around the city wall significant for religious purposes of procession and circumambulation.

The present alignment of the roads is within dangerous proximity to the *chörtens*. *Chörtens* are made of stone, mud and wood, and they are now in a dilapidated state, so when vehicles pass, the vibrations they cause only hasten the day when the *chörtens* will collapse.

Cave Archaeological Study in Mustang

The institutions which have joined their hands in High Mountain Archaeology Project were the Coulfield Meisezahl Institute (Bonn), German Research Society, Institute of Prehistory, University of Cologne, Commission for General and Comparative Archaeology (KAVA) of the German Archaeological Institute, Bonn, and the Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Education, Culture and Social Welfare, HMG, Nepal in 1991 for scientific study and archaeological excavation. The investigation and excavation was conducted in collaboration with the Institute of Prehistory, Germany. Investigations and excavations conducted under a joint Nepalese-German archaeological research project for prehistoric remains in the caves of Chokhopani (Tukuche), and at Phudzeling Mebrak, Khingar, Dzarkot and Garabdzong in Muktinath (Lower Mustang) from 1992 to 1997 also yielded important evidence, suggesting that the Kaligandaki Valley has been inhabited for nearly three millennia and that there were links with the Indian subcontinent as well as with Tibet and Central Asia. Organic samples found in cave system D have revealed that the cave settlement in Muktinath Valley may go back beyond 4000 B.C.

Chokhopani Cave

Chokhopani is situated on the left bank of Kali Gandaki in Tukuche. According to the report published in Ancient Nepal, no.85, the rock-cut cave of Chokhopani was covered with capstone. The chambers of the cave were disturbed by a small water electricity project. Rock-cut cave burial site was discovered accidentally when this project was working on site. After the discovery, they shifted and selected another place for electricity but destroyed at least three cave burials at different levels. It is about 40 meters from the bed of Kali Gandaki. It contained fragments of two skeletons, handmade grey vases, remains of cereal, copper anthropomorphic figures and earrings, shell ornaments, wooden spoons, stone arrow heads, musk deer teeth, channeled spouted bowls, cord-decorated pottery and storage jars, now on display at the Kapilvastu Museum..

The joint team of DoA and Cologne University found three burial caves and numerous grave goods. The artifacts included pottery, bronze and copper jewelry, beads of carnelian, bone and faience, bodkins made of schist. In one slipped funerary cave, the remains of at least 14 adults, 3 youths and 2 children were found. The burial remains from the south face belong to the prehistoric phase of around 800 B.C.

Dzong Cave Excavation

The cave system of Dzong opposite to the village site of Jharkot is interesting. It contains a six multi-storey cave system. An 8 m. long passage connects several cave rooms in the interior of the rock. The storing structures are mostly box-shaped. Some of the rooms are furnished with hearths and their ceilings are covered with soot. The walls of many caves are plastered with mud tampered with plant remains. The walls of some chambers show traces of elaborate paintings, bearing witness to the last occupation of the caves by Buddhist hermits. The radio carbon dating of the findings shows the early date as 810 to 799 B.C.

Phudzling Cave Excavation

About one hour walk to the east of Kagbeni lies the cave system and ruins of ancient settlement from prehistoric times. Remains of 34 houses are preserved on the river terrace above the river Dzong. There are remains of ruined buildings which belong to 13th century. The radio carbon analysis of a charcoal sample from this feature shows that the site was already inhabited in the Iron Age period, i.e., 363 to 200 B.C. However a fragment of a basket dug in the easternmost peak of the rock massif yielded radio carbon date as early as 805–766 B.C. Archaeologist also discovered the ruins of a tower. They say that they found charcoal animal bones, metal objects and ornaments of paper with Tibetan script drawing in the remains of cave chamber. These are all the remains of fire ceremony. They also found stone image of Boddhisattva at the former entrance of the ancient village.

Khingar and Jharkot Excavation

The structural remains exposed showed three settlement phases in the mound. The remains showed that the settlers constructed the fort in the centre of the mound in the first phase. In the second phase, they constructed small houses, and finally, in the third phase, the settlement was extended to other possible areas and fortified by erecting walls all around. The excavation carried out in Jharkot castle ruined showed that it was built without foundation .

Mebrakm Investigation in cave complex location 42

The ruins of Mebrak lie near Dzong in the Upper Muktinath Valley. On the floor above 40, i.e., on the sixth storey of the eastern B system were the preserved remains of the former gallery connecting the cave chambers. They comprised of large slabs of fitted slate, resembling a balcony. The gallery forms the entrance to the complex cave chamber location 42. The excavated 'architecture' there is a slightly lower lying antechamber leading

off the gallery is connected to the central chamber which is provided with a rear room and a higher lying storage room or bedroom.

One quite surprising result of the work there was the uncovering stratification with several occupation layers in the western part of the central chamber. The study and investigation of burial cave of Mebrak revealed that its artifacts and date is similar to Chokhopani i.e. 800 B.C. A child mummy (4th cen. B.C.) excavated from a cave in Membrak is now at the National Archives, but will soon be put on display at the National Museum.

Garab Dzong

Garab Dzong Excavation gives an account of the investigation of the settlement processes in the Kali Gandaki Valley and its tributaries. Besides the settlement on the Muktinath Valley, the researchers located the largest of the castles and fortified settlements at Garab Dzong in southern Mustang. It lies in the estuary of the Langbo Kyung in the Kali Gandaki Valley. By virtue of its location, it commands the north-south route through the valley and the route towards the east through Mesokanto pass on the way to Manang. Dendro-chronological reports reveal the founding of the fortified settlement in the first half of the 16th century A.D.

Petroglyphs studied in Kak-nyingba, Samar and Te support the evidence of the Neolithic period remains. Likewise, a cave study in Lower Mustang by the Department of Archaeology and the University of Cologne found pieces of evidence dating back to the 8th century B.C.

In 2007, the Upper Mustang Project conducted reconnaissance of additional caves—Goije Phu, Chukumau Dhakpu, Samdzong, Zhongkuyore, Rinziling, Nhyeyul, Shaka Phu, Marchung Cave, Tashe Kabung, Charang Cave, and Dhakmar Cve among others—that, despite their location being more than 150 feet above the ground, were carved and expanded in the Late Holocene, around 1000 BCE. This date for the earliest occupation of the caves is based on groundstone tools found near Kagbeni, which resemble “Neolithic” tools like those described above. Survey of these caves revealed that they contain thousands of pages of Buddhist text and invaluable wall paintings from the 14th–15th centuries, habitation deposits, and burials dating from the earliest occupation circa 1000 BCE to the Early Historic era, from 200–700 CE. An analysis of Samdzong cave burials revealed elaborate mortuary treatment: preparation for sky burial similar to the practices found in the region today; gold masks and beads adorning the human skeletons; copper pots and other artefacts placed alongside the dead.

Conclusion

Mustang is a unique place on the basis of its geological situation. It is also unique for its culture and religion. Numerous caves have been found with prehistoric artifacts and archaeological evidences. Therefore, it is the most important archaeological site and probable silk road corridor of Nepal.

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Beads from Samdzong

A child mummy (4th cen. B.C.) Membrak



Archaeologists at Samdzong Cave



Samdzong Cave



Petroglyph of Samar



Copper Buddha, Thubchen Monastery



Wall Painting of Goije Phu



Skeleton from Samdzong Cave



Lo Ghekar Monastery , Marang



Gold Mask from Samdzong Cave



Charang , Palace



Copper pot from Samdzong Cave

