LINKING ROUTES FROM THE SILK ROAD THROUGH NEPAL – THE ANCIENT PASSAGE THROUGH MUSTANG AND ITS IMPORTANCE AS A BUDDHIST CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

Recently more evidences have been found that in ancient times three passages through Nepal presumably have linked the Silk Roads with the Gangetic plains, especially with the Buddhist holy places and great Buddhist Universities of India particularly in the area of Magadha, today being part of the present State of Bihar with its capital Patna (formerly Pataliputra).

Many Chinese pilgrims and scholars attempted to visit these important Buddhist sites in Magadha, partly located in present Nepal, as for example, the city of Kapilvastu and in particular Lord Buddha’s birthplace in Lumbini (Fig.1), as well as Ramagram. Not all have been as successful as, for example, the famous Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-Xian (337 – c. 422 AD.). He entered India from the north-west, visited the Buddhist sites around Kapilvastu in present Nepal and reached Pataliputra, the second capital of the Magadha kingdom, were most of the Buddhist sites are found (Legge 1965). During his seventeen year lasting overland journey to India another well known Chinese Buddhist scholar and translator, Hieun Tsiang (c. 602 – 664), was in Lumbini in 637, before he was heading to Kushinagar, the place where Buddha passed away, and to Sarnath in present India, where he had given his first sermon (Bernstein 2001, Wriggins 2004).

These pilgrims and scholars left the Silk Road at Kashgar or Khotan, traversing the Taklamakhan and Gobi deserts, to travel through the Karakorum or the Himalayan massif further to India, to reach the so called Buddhist Route between Peshawar (in today’s Pakistan) and Pataliputra, in order to get to the destination of their pilgrimage. Their travels to visit the holy places of Kapilvastu, Lumbini and Ramagram covered an approximate distance of around 100 kilometres in present Nepal.
Discussion

The presentation will highlight the importance of the religious relations that, beside trade, facilitated the establishment of connecting passages to the Silk Road through Nepal. In this regard the development of a Buddhist cultural landscape along the pilgrimage route through Mustang will be discussed: Iconographical and stylistical similarities of several recently discovered cave-temple sites in Mustang with early Buddhist foundations on the Silk Roads in Central Asia and on connecting routes through Ladakh and West Tibet will be examined, demonstrating the religious and artistic influence of places along the Silk road and of West Tibet on Mustang. The presentation will offer proof of the early Buddhist art development along the old trade path in Mustang, radiating from the Silk Roads through the area of the Guge-Purang kingdom in West-Tibet.

Three Passages through Nepal

Two decades after the visit of Hieun Tsiang in Lumbini the Chinese scholar Wang Huen Tse (approx. 643 AD.) travelled from the city of Xian via a shorter route. As it seems he came through Tharchindo and Thindafu/Sindafu (in present Sechuan), Lhasa and Shigatse across the Trans-Himalayan range. In this way he crossed also the Kathmandu valley, to become the Chinese envoy of the king of Magadha in Pataliputra (Chopra 2003). Since then the route connecting Kathmandu and Xian was in frequent use; in the thirteenth century the great Newari architect and artist Araniko (1245-1306 A.D.) took this traverse to work first in Lhasa and thenafter at the court of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. Until 1905 this connecting path was regularly used by business caravans and Nepalese Government officials on their way to the Beijing court. This was one out of three directly linking routes to the Silk Road through the present Nepal State.

Another traverse from the Silk Road to the Indian Buddhist route went presumably through the Jumla and Humla area, particularly during the time of the Khas Malla Empire (c.12th-15th century AD) in West Nepal. Here, various, partly recently discoveries of copper plate inscriptions, stone steles and archeological remains of Buddhist temple sites and sculptures have testified, that this as well seems to have been a regularly visited path between India, Tibet and the Silk Route (Hawkes, Alvey, Evans, Harward, Kunwar 2012). But yet, too less is
known about this area and despite the importance of the Khasa Malla, relatively little is known about this kingdom until now.

The most ancient and regularly used passage through present Nepal appears to have been the old pilgrimage and trading route along the Kali Gandaki river, with many evidences for the interaction between India, Tibet and Central Asia found in particular in the area of the former small kingdom of Mustang. This way was linking Varanasi and Bodhgaya in India with Kapilvastu, Lumbini, Bhutwal and Ridi in Central Nepal, leading further through the Mustang region in Nepal to West Tibet and the Brahmaputra valley, continuing from there to Khotan as well to Kashgar, partly via Ladakh.

**Buddhist Cultural Landscape of Mustang**

Mustang and the Kali Gandaki river valley are bearing all evidences of a highly frequented route through the Himalayas linking with the Silk Road, also due to its easy access, without high mountain passes, facilitating greater interactions between parts of India and Tibet through networks of communication, pilgrimage and trade. Petroglyphs found in Mustang, more than 3000 years old, confirm the early human habitation of this area (Pohle 2000).

As recent research revealed (see Thingo, v.d. Heide 1998a & b; v.d. Heide, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012), especially since the 11th century a very important Buddhist cultural landscape evolved in this area, with influences partly from Central Asia, Kashmir, West Tibet and from Northern India. Over time, a close interaction between man and nature has shaped this cultural landscape, replete with centuries-old monasteries, temples and stupas, as well as recently rediscovered historically significant inhabited caves and cave-temple sites, dating from the 11th century onwards, with marvellously rendered wall paintings and numerous scriptures that have been found. These discoveries underline the importance of Mustang as a spiritual center, with a continuous religious and cultural development from the 11th onwards, culminating in the formation of an independent kingdom in the 15th century, demonstrating the close ties with West-Tibet, Ladakh and, as it seems, with places along the Silk Road.

Especially between the 11th and 13th century famous Buddhist scholars and saints like Atisha (982-1054), Marpa (1012-1097) and Milarepa (1040-1123) passed through Mustang, the southernmost border district of the area of Western Tibet rule, on their way to the kingdom of Purang-Guge, as late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author were able to prove (Thingo, v.d. Heide 1998a & b, v.d.Heide 2011). They often remained in Mustang for a longer period and under their influence new temple sites arose and monastic complexes were built, containing impressively painted cult rooms and valuable ornamentation, contributing to the enormous intellectual and cultural process that paved the way for the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (late 10th and 11th centuries).
The studies and restoration work carried out by late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author at the cliff cave site Mentsun Lhakhang in Mustang and the discovery of the cave temple of Dagrangjiung, Konchog and Chodzong have cast new light on aspects of the continuous development of early Buddhist art in Mustang from the 11th century on, at a time when it was under the influence of the Purang-Guge rule in Western Tibet. At that particular period religious and artistic influences from places along the Silk Road in Central Asia, as well as through connecting routes via Kashmir and Ladakh found their way into the Western Tibetan kingdom and have been transferred to Mustang via the Trans-Himalayan paths.

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