

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

Susanne von der Heide

Kathmandu University, Nepal

Keywords: Three passages through Nepal, connecting with the Silk Roads and Lumbini and Kapilvastu; most frequented route went through Mustang. Proof for early Buddhist art development in Mustang, radiating through the area of the Guge-Purang kingdom in West-Tibet

Introduction

Recently more evidences have been found that in ancient times three passages through Nepal presumedly 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, where 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 Taklamakan 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.



Fig. 1: Lumbini, Birth place of Lord Buddha in Nepal, Maya Temple and Ashoka Pillar

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 presumedly 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 archaeological 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).



Fig. 2: At Mentsun Temple, Mustang, 11th century.



Fig. 3: At Tumschuq, northern Silk Road, 7th Century



Fig. 4-6: Wall paintings with Asian traders at Menstun Cave-Temple in Mustang, 11th century

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 Dagrangjung, 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.

References / Selected bibliography:

Bernstein, R. *Ultimate Journey: Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk (Xuanzang) who crossed Asia in Search of Enlightenment.* Alfred A. Knopf, New York.,2001.

Bista, J. S.P., Gyalchung of Mustang, & von der Heide, S.. An Account on Cultural Heritage and Nature Conservation in Mustang, Nepal, in *World Cultural Heritage- A Global Challenge. Documentation of the International Symposium for EXPO 2000 in Collaboration with UNESCO*, A. Geiger and A. Eggebrecht (eds), pp. 186-189. Hildesheim 1997.

Chopra, P.N. *A comprehensive history of Ancient India*. Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003

Goepper, R. and Poncar, J (photography). *Alchi: Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary: The Sumtsek*, Boston, London, 1996.

Niels Gutschow, Chörten in Mustang. *Ancient Nepal*, Nos. 130-133, 1993, pp. 59-62.

----- The Chörten of the Cave at Luri. *Ancient Nepal*, No. 136, 1994, pp. 137-45.

J.D.Hawkes, B. Alvey, C.Evans, T.Harward, R.B.Kunwar, Finding the Khassa Malla: Preliminary Investigations of the Surkhet Valley, West Nepal, in *Ancient Nepal*, No. 179, pp.1-14. January 2012,

von der Heide, S. Buddhistische Klosterlandschaft in Mustang, Nepal. H. Gaese and T. Boehler (eds), *Denken in Raeumen. Tagungsband zum Symposium, 03-05. November 2004 in Osnabrueck*, Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU). Veranstaltet vom Institut fuer Tropentechnologie (ITT), FH Köln und DBU in Zusammenarbeit mit der Deutschen Unesco-Kommission. Köln, pp. 127-172, 2006,.

----- An Innovative Approach with Participation of Local Inhabitants for Restoration Work in Nepal, in Shobita Punja, ed., *Heritage Education*. INTACH. Papers of the Asian Regional Cooperation Conference, organised by INTACH in December 2008. New Delhi, pp. 57-66, 2008.

----- Aspects of Transcultural Movements along Ancient Trade Routes through the Himalaya – In, 'World Heritage and Cultural Diversity', Eds: German Commission for Unesco -Dieter Offenhausser, Brandenburg University of Technology - Walter Zimmerli, Unesco Chair in Heritage Studies - Marie-Theres Albert,. Publication regarding the International Conference on 'World Heritage and Cultural Diversity- Challenges for University Education' 23-25 October 2009 at the BTU. pp. 85-93, Cottbus 2010.

----- Hidden Gems Revealed: Clay Statues and Mural Paintings at the Mentsün Lhakhang Cave-temple in Mustang, Nepal, *Orientalia*, Vol. 42, No.5, pp. 41-49, June 2011.

----- Wall Paintings of Meditative Deities from the Mahāyoga Tantra in an Ancient Cave Temple in Upper Mustang, in Andrea Loseries, ed., *Proceedings of the 6th International Csoma de Körös Symposium on 'Hermeneutics of Tantric Literature and Culture'* at the Department for Buddhist Studies, University of Shantiniketan, West-Bengal, India, from 13th – 15th March 2009, Buddhist World Press, Delhi 2012.

Amy Heller, *Indian Style, Kashmiri Style: Aesthetics of Choice in Eleventh Century Tibet*, in *Orientalia*, pp. 18-23, December 2001.

S.L. and J.C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree - The Art of Pala India (8th-12th centuries) and Its international Legacy*. Seattle, London, 1990.

David P. Jackson, *A Genealogy of the Kings of Lo (Mustang)*, in Michael Aris, ed., *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, pp. 133-137, Oxford, 1979.

Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo - A Lamp for the Kingdom*, Milan, 1997.

Legge, J.A *Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms: Being an account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of his travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399-414) in search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*. Clarendon Press. Oxford 1886. Reprint: Paragon Book Reprint Corp. New York 1965.

Luczanitz, C. *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay – Early Western Himalayan Art, late 10th to early 13th Centuries*, Chicago 2004.

H.F. Neumann, *The Wall paintings of Luri Gompa*, in *Orientalia*, pp. 79-91, November 1994,-----
-*Paintings of the Lori Stupa in Mustang*, in J.C. Singer and P. Denwood, eds., *Tibetan Art - Towards a Definition of Style*, pp.178-85, London, 1997,

Pohle, P., 2000: *Rock engravings of Mustang (Nepal) - a unique source for research in cultural history and geography*. In: Thapa, R.P. & Baaden, J. (eds): *Nepal - Myths & Realities*: 521-536. Delhi.

Samosyuk, K.F. *Eleven-faced, Eight-armed Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri*, in M. Piotrovsky, ed., *Lost Empire of the Silk Road - Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto (X-XIIIth century)*.. Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation, p.128, p.139, Milano, 1993.

Shepherd Slusser M. and L. Bishop, *Another Luri: A Newly Discovered Cave Chorten in Mustang, Nepal*, in *Orientalia*, pp. 18-27, February 1999.

Ajay K. Singh, *An Aesthetic Voyage of Indo Tibetan Painting – Alchi and Tabo*, Varanasi, 2006.

Thingo, T.T. (Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche) & von der Heide, S. *Bericht an die Gerda Henkel Stiftung über eine kunsthistorische Forschung und Dokumentation im Distrikt Mustang, Nepal, Phase I*. Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf, 1998a.

----- *Bericht an die Gerda Henkel Stiftung über eine kunsthistorische Forschung und Dokumentation im Distrikt Mustang, Nepal, Phase II*. Gerda Henkel Stiftung Düsseldorf, 1998b.

Wriggins, Sally Hovey (2004). *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. ISBN 0-8133-6599-6