

# Reflections on the Existence of Castles and Observation Towers in the Area under Investigation, the South Mustang

(Thini - Jomsom - Dankardzong - Kagbeni - Jharkot)

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Previous research has shown a diversity of powers influencing the present-day district of Mustang in past centuries (Jackson 1978; Ramble and Vinding 1987; Schuh 1992; etc.). The political intrigues are said to have originate in the 7th century (Jackson 1978).

In past centuries the geographical and geological circumstances of the Kali Gandaki valley have led to the establishment of one of the most important trade routes between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan plateau. Kingdoms and local dukedoms struggled to bring it under their control through both wars and political settlements.

Jackson (1978) list's the following powers which have succeeded in controlling modern Mustang:  
7th to 9th century, Greater Tibet;

13th to 14th century, Gung-Thang;  
16th century, Jumla;  
17th century, Ladakh;  
18th century, (for a second time) Jumla;  
late 18th century (1789), Gorkha.

However, Schuh considers the first separation of local control in the Muktinath valley from Lo and their submission to Jumla as having taken place in the 17th century.

In the last 400 years a great number of castles of various types have been built in modern Mustang in order to control the trade and the road network on which it was based and in order to secure territorial control.

Snellgrove (1979) already mentions the impressive castle ruins of Dzong called Rab-gyal-rce.

According to Schuh (*Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des südlichen Mustang*, 1992) Tsampal Thukci is the founding clan of the castles of Dzong and Dzar.

According to the oral history passed down from a descendant of the clan, *dPal-mgon-khro-rgyal*, the castles of Kag and Dzar and a smaller building in Dzar were built by the younger "Tsampal-Thukci brother".

In his essay on Tibetan sources on the pilgrimage site of Muktinath, Ehrhard (1993) has brought together the references of present-day authors which indicate the early existence of castles or castle settlements in its surroundings. Jackson (1978), for instance, has found the toponym "Mukhun" in the Gung-thang chronicle, which describes it as one of the 13 "dynastic castles" built in the 13th century by the Gungthang king *Khri-rgyal'Bum-lde mgon* (1253-1280).

Ramble (1987) refers to the fact that the Se-skad speaking population of northern Baragaun equate Mukha with Dzar and Dzong. Current research will address the question of how far the place names employed correspond to actual settlement/castle sites.

### 1.1. Sites of castles and/or castle-like constructions

During this year's fieldwork in the area under investigation the following fortress ruins were located:

1. Garab Dzong (Sumbo Garabdzong/ dga'-rab rdzong), main fortress of the local kingdom of Sum (Ramble and Vinding 1987);
2. A castle-like group of buildings above Kunglithing;
3. Lubra, observation tower/fortress

(+garrison) on the north face above the settlement.

4. Dankardzong, a large fortress on the hogback, north-west of the recent settlement "Dankardzon";
5. A large fortress above Pikling (Nepal: Paklin);
6. The fortress of Kagbeni;
7. An observation tower on the cliff above derelict Phutseling;
8. The large fortress of Kalon, east of Khyinga;
9. The fortress of Dzong
10. The fortress of Dzar/Jharkot;
11. An observation tower on the hillock north of Jharkot (above the cave systems);
12. An observation tower on the eastern flank of derelict Newa, west of Dzong.

Map 1 shows the castles and castle-like ruins mapped during fieldwork 1993.

### 1.2 Possible functions of castles based on previous studies using historical texts (Schuh 1993; Everding 1993).

Apparently the many castles/castle-like buildings serve (apart from representation) to control access to valleys and so the protection of local duchies from hostilities as well as customs and tax revenue from transmitting trade caravans.

Examination of all existing castle ruins of southern Mustang and mapping of the angles of sight revealed that just these roads could be observed by neighbouring local duchies or kingdoms up to the passes and down the river valleys (cf. map 2). Next to trade troupe movements, in particular, could be observed early. Jackson (1978), for example, mentions the dispatch of an army from Gung-thang in 1252

with the aim of subjugating the Jumla empire and its vassals, Lo and Serib.

He also refers to the erection of one of the 13 dynastic castles in Mu-khun (cf. Chapter 1) and the appointment of Tibetan noblemen by the Gung-thang king as castle masters to control the area. It is interesting that the inhabitants of the upper Muktinath valley call themselves "Thakuris", obviously resulting from their knowledge of their "Thakuri" history.

Internal disputes within the Lo empire, such as the one between the king of Lo and his minister in Dzon, also caused armed conflict. 1652 is mentioned as the year of the dispute. Jumla joined in the minister's side and the prince of Lo was incarcerated in Kagbeni (Jackson 1978; Ramble and Vinding 1987).

In *Geschichte des südlichen Mustang und der Burgen des Muktinath-Tales*, Schuh (1992) describes the rights to levy customs duties (jagat) granted to the castle masters of Jharkot [Dzar] Topal Bista, the Barhagau [Baragaon] areas, Nar [Nar], and Manang [Manang]. These and other rights are allocated to the Nepalese king Ranbahadur Saha (1778-1799).

Customs collected by Chyakpol (*phyag-phul*) on commodities of traders in transit are mentioned for the year 1790. Custom duties were obviously levied by the Kagbeni fortress. This explains the interest which various small kingdoms showed for his strategically and materially important station.

In 1790 the right to these duties which previously belonged to the king of Jumla were transferred to the king of Mustang. The publications of Jackson (1978), Ramble and Vinding (1987) and Schuh (1992) show that the castle masters of the Muktinath valley were allied with the king of

Mustang. It was their responsibility to allocate these duties to the court in Lo Mantang.

As part of the organisation of spatial domination in southern Mustang, especially in the Muktinath Valley, the castle system secured the geographical space, which was accessible through an extensive road network (Graafen and Seeber 1993), from expansive neighbouring local dukes. In addition the presence of a number of vassals residing in castles secured the continuity of revenue from tax and custom duties for the governing administration.

## 2. Functional differentiation of the castles found

1. The castles ruins of Garabdzong, Dankardzong, and Piklin can be characterised as refuge castles. They were in all probability employed in times of war by neighbouring villagers as protection against encroachments.

First estimates of the number of buildings allow the conclusion that the population of several villages used the refuge castles in times of danger respectively political instability.

However, this presumes that arrangements were made between villages, which still remains to be proved.

Knowledge of the existence of a subterranean supply of drinking water within the castles (Garabdzong, Jharkot) proves that the castles were intended for long-term use. Without the existence such a supply, a long-term settlement (which the nature of the domestic and defensive buildings indicate these places here) would not have been possible.

The existence of refuge castles allowed defence against aggressors, the existence of weapons,

guns, swords, etc., in Thini bear witness to this. For this reason the term defence castle would also be applicable.

2. The most prominent type of castle, next to that above mentioned, represented by the many tower-like ruins with up to 3 storeys in the periphery of villages (Lubra, Phutselin). They are all placed on strategically favourable elevations and enable a view of surrounding roads, such that the phrase observation tower seems appropriate. The towers are constructed so as to allow the accomodation of soldiers/troops in times of war.

During the investigations it was noticeable that from any one of these towers one or several other towers on the other side of the valley or within the Kali Gandaki valley were visible, even today. Communication between them regarding trade, troops and, to a lesser extent, pilgrim movements is thus possible. Photographs from various perspectives show that direct sight between castles was and is possible.

3. The collection of buildings in Dzong and Jharkot can be regarded as fortresses proper. They were erected on the ridge of hills on both sides of the valley. From towers integrated into the fortresses observations of the road system (passes, roads, river valley) and other fortress constructions were possible.

The location of the fortresses in relation to the actual settlements indicated the prior establishment of the former. This will require confirmation dendrochronological tests.

4. With reference to the complex of ruins in Kagbeni these emerges a fourth type. First datings (Gutschow/Schmidt 1993) indicate the establishment of the fortress before the settlement. The geo-strategic location (in a

tapering part of the Kali Gandaki) allowed the control of this main trade route to which there was no alternative (except the very time-consuming detour through the Muktinath Valley, via the path from Dzong over the pass to Tanbe). Therefore this bastion enabled the levying of duties and taxes on commodities and transport animals. The internal structure of the fortress consists of several small narrow rooms which indicates its usage as a "palace".

Hence the Kagbeni fortress combined domestic, protective, representational and control (taxes, customs duties) function.

### 3. Possible forms of inter-castle communication

It is probable that bronze mirrors were used for long-distance communication given that approximately 230-245 days a year have sun. Such a mirror has been found in central Tibet (Ronge/Ronge/Hüttel 1990). This hypothesis has been strengthened by a further mirror finding during an excavation by Hüttel in the abandoned settlement of Kalon (near Khyinga).

This second mirror (Fig. 1) is made of a bronze disc with two reflecting sides. The inner side of the mirror is concave while the outer is convex. The patina is light and bronze-coloured on both sides. The form is similar to the central Tibetan bronze mirror originating in the Han dynasty (1st century B.C. to 1st century A.C.), according to Ronge/Ronge/ Hüttel (1990). Possibly the aesthetic criteria for manufacturing the Kalong mirror have been imported and received from China, probably via Tibet.

Red colour traces on the surfaces, similar to those found on the Tibetan mirror, and the remains of some red cloth indicate a gold foil coating which would be suitable for signal

transmission.

The position of the mirror finding (see map) is the third and therefore oldest settlement stratum of the abandoned settlement of Kalong, approximately datable to the 11th to the 13th century<sup>1</sup>. However, this does not exclude the possibility of its origin being much older. Rather it allows the interpretation of trade activities or religiously inspired commodity movements prior to the 11th century. Hoffmann (1967), for instance, refers to mirrors as attributes of the Bon religion and shamanism. At any rate, further intensive research is required before any conclusions can be reached about the population's religion at the time of the third settlement stratum.

Experiments with glass mirrors in spring 1993 enhance the supposition of this form of communication in the past. At night signalling with fire was possible. However, this statement is still speculative as access to the present area of investigation was almost impossible at night. But it can be presumed that observation towers were occupied around the clock in wartime.

During inspection of the ruins several wooden samples were collected. Thanks to the dendrochronological examinations (Schmidt, B. 1992/2)<sup>2</sup> a first estimate can be given of the timber and thus of the beginning of construction. Probable dates when castle construction was started:

Garabdzong	second third of 16th century
Kagbeni	second half of 16th century
Dzar/Jharkot	early 17th century
Dzong	early 17th century
Dankardzong	early 17th century

Map 2 shows the castle ruins located so far, their

type and angles of view.

#### 4. Description of some of the castle-like constructions in the area under investigation

##### 1. Dankardzong

North-northwest, but within the boundaries of the Dankardzong settlement there is a refuge castle on a rock with the same name (hogback of metamorphously impressed marine sediment).

The castle ruin belongs to the refuge castle type, is 35 metres long and lies on the north-south axis. An observation tower must have been situated at the southern part of the village. From here the Lubra and Dzong fortresses and the observation tower on the rockface opposite Jharkot are visible (map 2/3).

Beneath the village's southern part there is an artificial cave.

According to informants from Dankardzong, women and children from the surrounding villages found sheltered here during the wars against Jumla empire. A leather sandal was recovered from within the cave. Samples from the existing strata are presently being radiocarbon dated.

A path from the derelict village leads through further derelict villages on the eastern rockface. Many foundation walls are still visible. The path continues through River valley/ravine to present-day Dankardzong.

Dankardzong translates as "fortress on the rock" which also indicates the existence of the ancient

refuge castle.

## 2. Kunglithing

On the Road from Jomsom in the direction of Kagbeni, on the left bank of the Kali Gandaki, about 2km from Old Jomsom. The derelict village covers the entire north face. Several foundations of strong quarry-stone masonry cover the whole face. On the plateau-like ridge there are foundation walls of a large building containing several rooms. In the settlement's lower part there is an orchard (peaches/apricots).

On the western side of the village three quite well-kept pottery stoves were located. No timber was found (apparently exploited by later generations), which renders dating of the settlement difficult. A path leads from the upper area of the settlement down to the river valley/ravine and along the river to the coppice of the Thini settlement; nowadays this is exploited by the inhabitants of Jomsom also. The woods around Kunglithing are designated in the following fashion: Kunglirika (forest on the goatwall/ informants from Thini) and Jabsorika (forest on the mountain side/informants from Kagbeni).

## 3. Garabdzong (Sombu garab Dzung / dga'-rab rdzon)

This derelict village is a defensive and refuge castle of considerable size. It is placed on a hillock of jutting slate, isolated by the river valley and erosion gullies and ravines. The highest and central point is littered with the remains of a Chorten (buddh. trailmarker). Dendrochronological analyses point to the second third of the 16th century. The ground-plan of the settlement

is elliptical and littered with more than 50 ruins of domestic buildings.

A central gateway leads from the south via a small plateau to the hillock, lined with three Chorten. This is probably the only entrance to the village. A number of relicts on the north face indicate that one could get to the southern gate by going beneath the fortress wall. From the castle hill one can oversee the Kali Gandaki Valley with its trade and pilgrimage routes to the south of Syang, where nowadays the airstrip is situated, and into the Langbo Kyun valley, in other words one can oversee the road to and from the Mesokanto pass/Manang.

## Notes

1. I owe this information and a drawing of the site to the leader of the excavation, Dr. Hüttel of the DAI in Bonn, for which I would like to express my gratitude.
2. The more exact datings are discussed by B. Schmidt (University of Cologne) in this volume.

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