

Excavation at Garab-Dzong, Dist. Mustang

Preliminary report of the campaign 1994

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Since the beginning of 1994 the Institute of Prehistory of the University of Bonn under the direction of Prof. Dr. Helmut Roth has participated in the "Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology". This investigation, which enjoys the cooperation of HMG Department of Archaeology, centres on the fortified settlement of Garab-Dzong, Dist. Mustang, Nepal.¹ The excavation is part of an ongoing broader programme of research which commenced in 1992. The latter has as its goal the investigation of the settlement processes and state formation in the high Himalayas characterized by Tibetan culture and tradition. Thereby researchers of different disciplines from Nepal and those from several European countries have convened.²

The project which began this year is dealing with the settlement archaeology of the immediate area of southern Mustang, in the centre of which the

hill fort of Garab-Dzong is located. Decisive for our selection of this area were the following reasons: Castles and fortified settlements which are numerous in the area under investigation represent especially in light of the historically recorded state formation an important source. They document the measures of regional and local rulers to secure and control areas acquired.³ Inasmuch as the archaeology of protohistoric and medieval castles and fortified settlements already was represented through the excavation project of Dr H.-G. Hüttel (KAVA, German Archaeological Institute) with an emphasis in the Muktinath valley,⁴ our intention was directed to the other large valley system of southern Mustang, the Kali-Gandaki valley and its tributaries.

In the same way as in the Muktinath valley, castles and fortified settlements also are manifest which situated on strategic places command the routes which traverse the Kali-Gandaki valley and

its tributaries. The largest of the castles and fortified settlements in southern Mustang, Garab-Dzong, 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 this valley, and the route toward the east through the Mesokanto pass on the way to Manang. The settlement (Fig. 1) is located on a hill a few kilometres southwest of Jomsom, the provincial capital. Owing to erosion on all sides, the hill is separated from the surrounding terrace and connected solely by means of a narrow saddle in the south. On three sides the hill is easily fortifiable given inclines as steep as 45° and is suitable for a fortified settlement of which considerable remains on the plateau and the slopes are preserved. These include several free-standing fragmentary concentric walls.

The historical importance of this fortified settlement already has earned the attention of scholars. D. Jackson, who has elucidated the written sources for the history of Mustang in several contributions,⁵ has shown that since the time of the Tibetan empire of the 7th to 9th centuries AD in the area of present-day Mustang beside *Glo* a second geographical-political entity is recorded, called *Se-Rib*.⁶ This area is only rarely mentioned, but according to Jackson and Schuh often enough that the conclusion seems secure that *Se-Rib* formed a political and cultural entity that, "geographically formed a special unit next to *Glo* and includes several areas in the upper Kali-Gandaki valley".⁷ Even if from the hitherto evaluated sources *Se-Rib*'s former extent cannot be determined, on the strength of certain sources Jackson presumes that the fortification of Garab-Dzong played an important role in this area.⁸

Despite the fact that in the local historical tradition the existence of *Se-Rib* is undocumented,⁹ in the written historical sources of the

Thak Khola (*Bem-chag*) a local kingdom with the name *Sum* comes down to us.¹⁰ In addition to the mere mention of *Se-Rib*, in this source borders are named which show its hegemony. They continue to the North to the latitude of the Lubra valley, to the South directly below Cimang, and to the East as far as the pass to Manang.¹¹ An otherwise unknown king named *Thokarcen* founded *Sum* whose chronological position is uncertain owing to the special nature of the textual sources.¹² On the other hand, the *Bem-chag* cites different historically known persons who mention that the compilation of this source occurred first in the second half of the 17th century AD.¹³

Important for the archaeological investigation is first the fact that in the *Chimang Bem-chag* is written that the erection of the fortification of Garab-Dzong occurred at a place where an older complex existed.¹⁴ If this part of the text correctly refers to the former conditions, then we would expect a multiperiodical settlement, the traces of which are to be sought in the excavation.

A settlement-archaeological investigation of the fortified complex of Garab-Dzong and its immediate vicinity therefore must consider the following source-related points:

1. At what point in time does the settlement on the fortified hill of Garab-Dzong begin and end?
2. Can periods be distinguished individually for the entire occupation, and how can this be established relatively and absolutely?
3. Structural comparisons of the different periods of settlement i.e. which function did the different periods of settlement fulfil? Can a fortification be determined for the earliest period or was a fort subsequently built in an existing settlement? Beside the fortification can other factors be determined which

- demonstrate the purpose of the settlement (manufacturing or trade centre)?
4. In a region the character of which as a thoroughfare is geographically clear, the question arises whether different cultural impulses additionally in a chronological dimension are active which for this multiphased cultural sequence can be established.
 5. The question regarding the chronology and formation of a social-political centre in a part of the Tibetan Himalayas, conditions at the same time the investigation of the effect of the settlement situation in the area directly adjacent the 'centre'. Therefore, at a later point in time we intend to investigate further satellite settlements around Garab-Dzong which belong in the settlement analysis.

Garab-Dzong possesses several archaeological advantages. First, there was no subsequent building activity on the site which would have limited the selection of areas to be excavated. On the other hand, it was noted during the first surveys that within the walls themselves often wooden beams and boards are preserved which proved to be an excellent source of dendrochronological information.¹⁵ Since previously no chronological framework existed this fact cannot be emphasized enough. In this way we possess the means under favourable conditions to date the building periods individually. Taken in light of ¹⁴C dating and thermoluminescence we obtain a further basis to date the cultural inventory (small finds, pottery etc.) in absolute chronological terms.

During the 1994 campaign work was concentrated on the uppermost plateau, since here as opposed to the slope settlement, which is disturbed as a result of landslips, undisturbed stratigraphic observation was expected. Our efforts began with

the establishment of a surveying system over the hill. The polygon has two right angles which converge toward each other, and the central bench mark is located on the eastern border of the construction. Instrumental to this selection was the fact that one could install here a north-south axis only slightly deviating from magnetic north, the anchoring of which in the ground by means of wooden pegs would only be compromised by the existing buildings. Parallel to this in the peripheral areas of the modern settlement a polygon with 15 points was set up from which the recording of the visible structures could be conducted in a 1:100 scale.

In the time available the entire upper plateau, measuring 125 x 30-40 m, could be surveyed and documented (Appendix 1). An elongated irregular oval group of ruins was surrounded by an enclosure wall. This wall remains near the western edge of the escarpment sometimes of several metres height are still standing, but much on the eastern edge has succumbed to erosion. The enclosure appears to have been erected in a single phase, which suggests a central authority for construction in this settlement period. To what extent the buildings on the slope and further enclosure walls were built at this time will be the subject of investigation in the forthcoming campaign.

Judging by the visible walls only, nearly 50 house units on the upper plateau can be identified. A first study of the settlement structures visible on the general plan suggests that probably we are dealing with a double settlement on the upper plateau. In the centre a nearly rectangular open area is recognizable which is surrounded on three sides by densely concentrated small architectural units. It gives the impression of extreme compactness. North of the open area lies a settlement tract which is separated from the rest of the

plateau by means of a closed facade with a single central entrance. The structures within this quarter, to judge from the remains on the surface is more generously proportioned, and we may conclude that here some of the central buildings of the settlement were located.

The main goal of the first campaign of excavation was the determination of the chronological range of the settlement in Garab-Dzong. Parallel to the investigation of the extant structural remains it was therefore important to look for signs of older settlement not visible on the surface in a central part of the plateau. In 1994 we intended to excavate to virgin soil in order to make first assessments as to the beginning of settlement in Garab-Dzong.

The position of the trenches was oriented on the structural remains visible on the surface. Following a first inspection we imposed several parallel long trenches across the plateau which would enable us to record the areas of the central area as well as the surrounding buildings. A complete profile across the plateau was intended in which the sequence of layers of the settlement were represented. While the trenches B I/XI and B II/XII were begun at once, trench B III/XIII followed in order to extend the profile to the wall on the western slope. The surface of the trenches comprised in all nearly 200 m².

The stratigraphic situation can be readily summarized. In the trenches B I/XI and B III/XIII structures were uncovered which belong to the extant building remains, and thus are part of the fortified complex visible on the surface (Appendix 2). The different rooms were filled with debris in some places of 1 m depth which could not be divided stratigraphically. All of the rooms investigated showed a thin tamped clay floor below the natural soil level. Directly beneath them was virgin soil or massive rock. Just above

the floors in several rooms different structural features which shed light on the construction and use were documented. In some room post supports still stood in place (Fig. 2). Generally the entrances of the houses and rooms survived in which the remains of wooden roofing poles were preserved (Fig. 3). In H(ouse) 2/3 a fire place (Fig. 4) was revealed allowing an identification of this room as a kitchen.

Trenches B I/X and B III/XIII yielded a great deal of wood; owing to its excellent preservation it lent itself to dendrochronological interpretation. This wood derives from the debris on the floors and from the walls and doorways. This data sheds light on the building of the houses and their occupation. The oldest wood samples measured till now in the Dendrochronological laboratory of the University of Cologne reveal a founding of the fortified settlement in the first half of the 16th century AD.¹⁶ These verify the datings published by B. Schmidt in 1992/3.¹⁷

In the area of the architecture visible on the surface repairs and additions can be determined, also datable by means of dendro dates. This is particularly clear in House 2/1 (trench B I/XI). The eastern wall (W 3) became dilapidated at some point in time and was shored up inside by a reinforcement wall. This was further strengthened by three vertically placed poles and some horizontal boards (Fig. 5). On the western side probably during the course of the same build the entrance was changed. A wall (W 18) extending into the trench in the north was built upon an older doorway the remains of which appeared in the trench as wooden door sill. Beneath the walls fragments of older floors occurred.

On the strength of the dendro dates available up to now this rebuilding took place in the first half of the 17th century.¹⁸ The wood samples indicate

nearly uninterrupted building activity till the end of the 18th century, and match well with the datings which were determined in 1992. Since no evidence came to light for a catastrophic end of the fortification, and dendro datings from the 19th century are not yet known, one can surmise a successive abandoning of Garab-Dzong during this century.

Evidence for settlement prior to the 16th century came to light in trench B II/XII. Beneath the floor level of the extant architectural remains several pits were sunk into the soil which contained fill of debris which was partially a loose humous mixed with gravel (Fig. 6). In these pits in addition to a large amount of pottery the remains of metal working came to light, including piles of slag and the remains of crucibles. Unfortunately no wood suitable for dendro dating came to light in this context, but recently several samples of charcoal became available for ¹⁴C dating.

Architectural remains which belong to this older period of settlement as yet have not been encountered. Several models can explain this: Either during the building of the fortified complex all of the existing buildings were demolished in order to make way for the new programme of building, or the existing architectural remains continued in use in such a way that their oldest dating is not determinable. Possibly we are dealing with a settlement in the earlier period entirely different in its structure. Indicative of this interpretation is the abundant evidence for metal working in the pits below the floors in trench B II/XII. If the filling of these pits was not brought in from outside, for which there is no evidence, then we must conclude that in the centre of the hill metals workshops were located, certainly out of place in a dense packed settlement.

Notable among the finds are ca. 25000 sherds which were completely recorded during the course of the excavation. From our experience 10 to 20% can yield dating information on the basis of shape. Preliminary study of the pottery reveals 11 wares. Nearly 200 different rim forms are distinguishable. Most of the pottery is rough ware which is handmade with the rim area wheel-turned. Rarer are wheel-turned, fine engobed wares which are mainly drinking vessels. Probably these wares were either imported from the South or imitate pieces from there. With regard to the coarse ware, dominant are globular forms with simple undifferentiated rims. The majority of the pottery are storage vessels with a funnel rim and flat or rounded floor. Some sherds can be identified as having served for the production of *Chang*. Saucers and small beakers also occur.

The spectrum of the small finds corresponds to that which one would expect in an abandoned settlement. The iron and bronze objects include costume and adornments such as belt buckles, two fragments of bronze bangles or finger rings. Although the iron finds frequently are poorly preserved, arrowheads, nails, and objects of diverse function are in evidence. Useful for dating are some sherds of Chinese porcelain, which provides evidence for the trade connections of the population. Noteworthy also are beads of clay, coral, and glass, as well as a fragment of a glass bangle and a copper coin, the identification of which must await its restoration.

Following our first campaign of excavation in Garab-Dzong we can summarize that we succeeded in determining several periods of occupation the latest expression of which is a fortified complex dating to the first half of the 16th century. In all likelihood this settlement was abandoned in the 19th century. Within this period of occupation different rebuilding phases can be

determined, by virtue of dendrochronology of the wooden timbers used. An older period of settlement is revealed only in the form of pits, the dating of which rests on 14C samples still under study.

In the forthcoming excavation campaign we plan to look for earlier architectural remains. We will concentrate our efforts on the upper plateau where already during the first campaign we determined areas which seem promising.

(Translation into English by Dr. P. Yule)

Notes

1. For his granting of an excavation permit, we should like to thank the Director General of HMG Department of Archaeology, Mr K.M. Shrestha. He and Mr T.N. Mishra gave the project their whole-hearted support. During the course of the excavation, the Department was represented by Mr Ch.P. Tripathee. From the German side Dr. E. Pohl led the excavation. In addition the following staff participated: U. Müssemeier, M.A., A. Lennartz, E. Hoven, T. Höltken, and Dipl.-Ing. K.-G. Brager. They are heartily thanked here for their efforts.
2. Conception and first results of the research programme: see Haffner/Pohle (1993) and the reports in *Ancient Nepal* volumes 130-133, 1992-93; 134, 1993; 136, 1994.
3. With regard to the role of the archaeology of castles in the context of the research programme see Hüttel (1993 [1]) 1ff.
4. First results of these excavations: Hüttel (1993 [1]), idem. (1993 [2]) and Tripathee (1993).
5. Jackson (1976); idem. (1978); idem. (1984).
6. Jackson (1978) 198ff; see also Ramble/Vinding (1987) 7ff; Vinding (1988) 169ff.
7. Schuh (1992) 1.
8. Jackson (1978) 208ff. "...it would have been an important center of political power in Serib" (ibid. 208); "...it would seem that the old ruined fort south-west of Thini was once the political center of Se-Rib" (ibid. 210). See also Vinding (1988) 174ff.
9. Schuh (1992) 1; Vinding (1988) 174.
10. Ramble/Vinding (1987) 13ff; Vinding (1988) 174ff.
11. Ramble/Vinding (1987) 15ff.
12. With regard to the differing ways of rendering the name of the king and the resulting difficulties for the chronological sequence, see Ramble/Vinding (1987) 6; Vinding (1988) 174ff, esp. note 49; Schuh (1992) note 95.
13. Schuh (1992) 1; Vinding (1988) 174.
14. Ramble/Vinding (1987) 15.
15. The first dendrochronological investigations occurred 1992 in the research programme of Dr B. Schmidt, University of Cologne. Schmidt (1992/93).
16. Oral information B. Schmidt, Cologne.
17. Schmidt (1992/93) 31 fig. 6.
18. Oral information B. Schmidt, Cologne.

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Fig.1: Garab-Dzong, Dist. Mustang - general view from south.

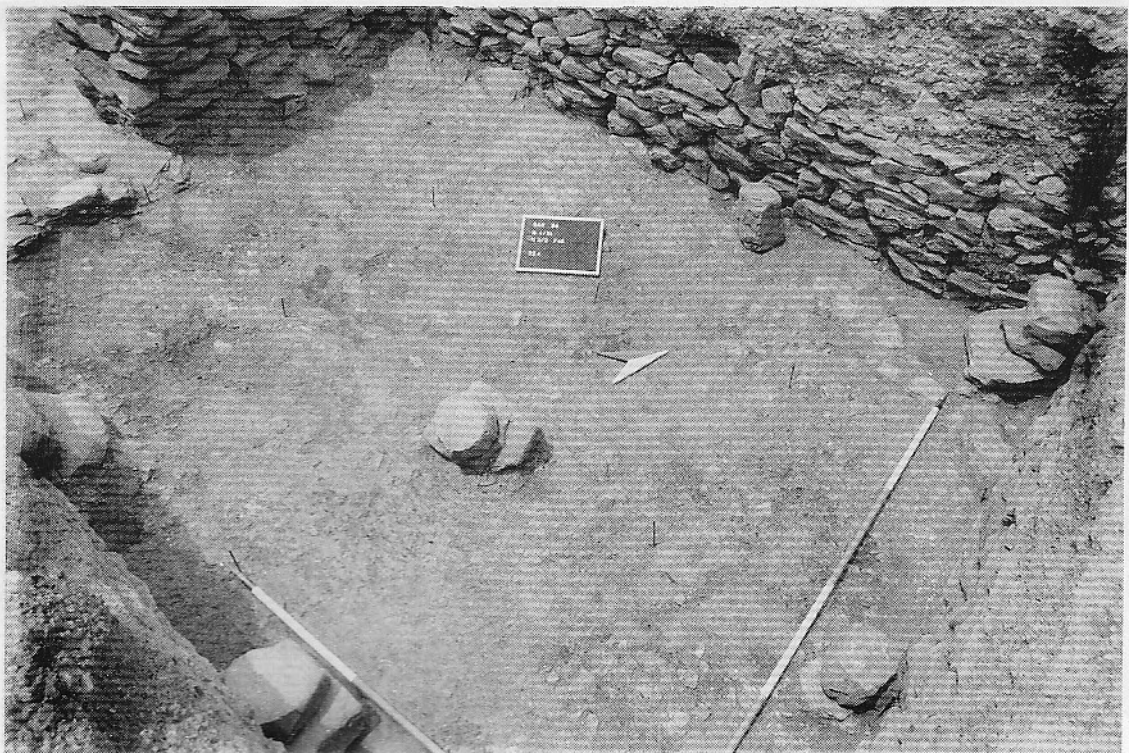


Fig.2: Garab-Dzong, H(ouse) 2/2 - tamped clay floor with post supports.



Fig.3: Garab-Dzong, Trench B I/XI - view from west into H(ouse) 2.

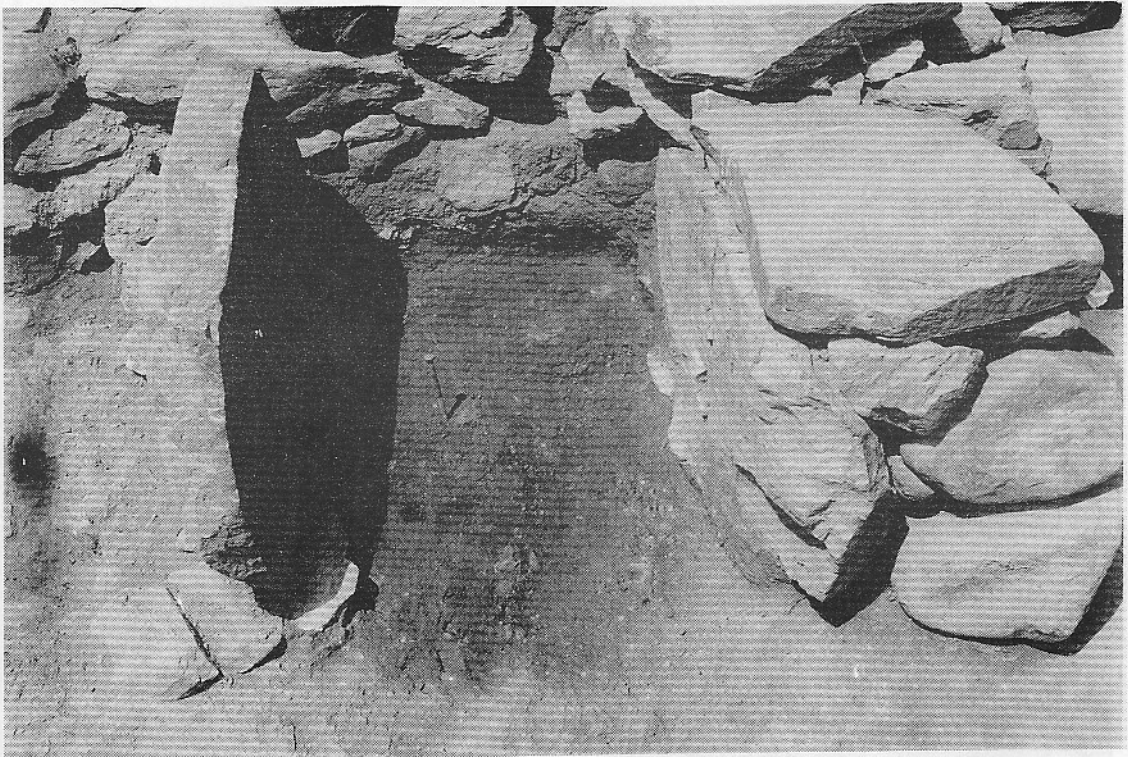


Fig.4: Garab-Dzong, H(ouse) 2/4 - fireplace.



Fig.5: Garab-Dzong, W(all) 3 from north.



Fig.6: Garab-Dzong, Trench B II/XII - pit filled with loose clay, potsherds and remains of metal working.