

Citation:

Dorji Penjore (2017). Digging the Past: The State of Archaeological Study of Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies* Vol 36 (Summer), 40-57

Digging the Past: The State of Archaeological Study of Bhutan

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This is only a preliminary note on the current state of archaeology and potential of archaeological study in understanding Bhutan and its past. The author prepared the paper as talking points for an international conference on “The Prehistoric Archaeology of the Tibetan Plateau” (Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 21-24 August 2011) organised by the Centre for Tibetan Studies of Sichuan University and the Institute of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Palaeoanthropology of the Chinese Academy of Science. Only a few points have been added.

Archaeology or archaeological study of Bhutan is literally non-existent. The country’s rich archaeological sites await excavation and systematic study to shed much needed light on the history of early settlers. Wedged between the two great civilizations of Tibet and India, settlement of what is today Bhutan must have predated that of Tibetan plateau because of the former’s fertile central valleys and favourable climates. In absence of any systematic archaeological study and findings, presence of stone tools and megaliths found across the country are the only existing evidence of pre-historic people in Bhutan. These stone artefacts and structures are found across the country, and stone tools (adzes) are ubiquitous in

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Bhutanese homes. Records that could have provided information on early settlers had been lost to warfare, fires, earthquakes, floods, and other natural calamities. The entire historical documents of the Punakha dzong were lost when fire destroyed it in 1832 followed by an earthquake in 1897. Most places and sites with potential association to early or pre-historic people are being lost to time, natural forces, and human activities. Fragility of the Himalayan ecology does not help the situation.

The pre-historic period differs from one place to another. If it is defined as a period before the writing culture, the period up to the seventh century could be said to be Bhutan's prehistoric period. Bhutan is first mentioned in relation to building of Kyichu lhakhang in Paro and Jampa lhakhang in Bumthang by Songtsan Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*, 569-650 or 617-650) in the seventh century. By the time of Guru Padmasambhava's second visit to Bhutan after building Samye in 779, the writing culture was flourishing in Bhutan. It was even supplying Tibet with *deysho* (traditional handmade paper). One of the reasons why Trisong Deutsen (*khri srong de'u btsan*, 790-844) sent Denmang Tsemang to accompany Guru Padmasambhava to Bhutan was to thank Bhutan for supplying thousand of loads of *deysho* for writing Buddha's teachings and commentaries at the Samye. As Guru Padmasambhava scribe Denmang Tsemang wrote his teachings in *lhoyig* script, then used widely in Bhutan (Phuntsho Tashi, 2004, p. 194).

But the legendary account of the settlement of Bhutan goes far beyond that. Some hundreds of years before the birth of the Buddha, an Indian prince locally known as Drime Kunden (Skt. Vesantara) was exiled to Duri Hashang (Black Mountain) in central Bhutan, and a few places still bear the names named after the events of the exiled prince's journey through the valley (Ministry of Health & Education, 1999). In 433 A.D. when an Indian Buddhist scholar Buddharaksita went to Tibet following the Kurichu valley in eastern Bhutan, a Bhutanese, Losemtsho, was his interpreter and guide (Ministry of Health & Education, 1999).

At present, there is no interest in constructing Bhutan's history through archaeological research. There is no government policy or academic institution to study archaeology. Little existing archaeological work in the country is the results of accidental discovery of archaeological sites while ploughing fields or digging earth for house construction. Fortunately, things are changing. The first archaeological rescue excavation of Batpalathang in 1999-2000 was followed by the excavation of the ruins of Chokhor Dzong in 2008-2011, both in Bumthang, central Bhutan.

Prehistoric Remains

The central valleys of Bhutan may have been settled by humans much before the Tibetan plateau because of its fertile land and favourable climate. Unfortunately, no archaeological work has been done to study any remnants of pre-historic people. Any remnants of pre-historic people in Bhutan such as caves, stone structures, paintings, and rock art (must) have assumed new religious meanings and significance, be it animistic, shamanistic, Bon, and lastly Buddhism. Buddhism, more than any other major world religions, encourages practitioners to meditate in solitary mountain caves, coincidentally the homes of pre-historic people. Whatever evidence pre-historic people had left in caves have been erased forever, or hide beneath new Buddhist images, or assumed new Buddhist meanings. Similarly, there are stone or rock features, stone megaliths, artefacts etc., which are today invested with Buddhist significance. One example is a series of open-air rock art of varied style, media and theme found along the riverbed in the upper reaches of Thimphu (Kuenga Wangmo, 2014a) labelled as 'prehistoric'. Among the assemblage are a mammal of the equid family; a four-legged animal with a pair of horns (see Figure 1), a horse-like mammal that is slightly engraved, and two animals in flight, all painted in red. Kuenga noted that the painting is from the historic period, but the historical layer is superseded by Buddhist

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inscription written with charcoal, and *mani*-mantras written in synthetic paint had in turn erased the earlier layers.



Figure 1: Pre-historic rock painting discovered by Kuenga Wangmo at Gasa; Photography by Kuenga Wangmo, 2014.

The history of Bhutan mentions that the country was first settled around 2000-1500 BC. This date is based on the inspection of a Bhutanese adze by the British Museum. Bhutan is assumed to have been settled by 2000-1500 BC since the stone adzes were used during the same era (Aris, 1979).

Iron Axe From the Sky

According to the Buddhist cosmology, the gods (*lha*) and demi-gods (*lha ma yin*) are in a state of perpetual war over the fruits of a wish-granting tree (*dpag bsam gyi shing*). The gods throw down iron axes (*gnam lcag*: ‘iron from the sky’ or *gnam lcag sta re*: ‘iron axe from the sky’) while the demi-gods shoot up pressurised gases (*sa chu*) from the earth. Stone tools in the form of axes (adzes) which the Bhutanese farmers come across in farms are believed to be the weapons of the gods, and as such they are treasured as prosperity-bringing power objects. Because they are invested with sacred power, farmers preserve these stone objects. Most Bhutanese houses possess at least one of these stones. The National Museum of Bhutan in Paro has a collection of adzes of different shapes and sizes.



Figure 2: Iron from the sky (adze); National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.

The Oath Pillar

There are standing megaliths (*doring*, *rdo ring*) in the central Bhutan that might have served as boundary or ritual purpose. Megalith in Shaithangla, a pass between Ura and Tang valleys, was clearly used as border demarcation (Aris, 1979). In Konchogsum lhakhang there is a pillar inside a mortar, and pillar plinth and its fragment. Similarly, stone pillars are kept outside the Sombrang lhakhang in Bumthang.



Figure 3: Oath stone of Nabje; Photography by Dorji Gyeltshen.

The Rock Pillar of the Sky

There are two megaliths in Dagana district in south central Bhutan known by their quasi-mythical names: Do Namkhai Kaw (*rdo gnam kha'i ka wa*: The Rock Sky Pillar) and Do Kelpai Genthey (*rdo bskal pa'i gyen the*: The Rock Aeon Steps). The third one is a cliff fortress, Namkhai Dzong (*mtha gnam mkha'i rdzong*: The Frontier Sky Fortress). They are believed to be siblings, and found at different locations as part of a larger tripod.

Facing the Dagana Dzong across the river on a mountain slope, 20-meter-tall Do Namkhai Kaw stands above all the surrounding trees. Both its face and the top have flat surfaces. The circumference of the base sunken among dense undergrowth measures approximately 15 metres. It is said to have flown from India. When it arrived at its present site, all the trees and rocks were said to have bowed respectfully. Even today, all the stones, and rocks in the area bend towards this megalith. Do Kelpai Genthey measures as high as Do Namkhai Kaw from the base. Its face, however, is covered halfway by the paddy fields. As the name suggests, its unique feature is a flight of five steps that zig zags upward towards the pinnacle. One of the steps is not visible and supposedly sunken underground. The present aeon would end when all remaining four submerges. The local people consider Tha Namkhai Dzong as a sacred site (*gnas*) blessed by Guru Rinpoche. Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji is said to have recognized the place as sacred during his visit to Dagana. From below, the cliff is seen so high up, as if it were suspended in the sky, and hence its name, the Frontier Sky Fortress (Kinga, 2006).

The Stone Pillars at Wamling

In Wamling, a remote village in central district of Zhemgang, there are stone pillars (*gortalai kawa*) in the middle of forests. According to a village lore a plan to build Samchodrong (*rtsa mchog grong*) at Saipogpa in Wamling was abandoned after a devil (*dud*) called out in the manner of a rooster which was interpreted as inauspicious. Stacks of

stone pillars and planks meant for building Samchodrong can be found in the forests above the village (Figure 4) (Dorji Penjore, 2011).



Figure 4: One of stone pillars of Wamling, Zhemgang; Photography by the author, 2007.

Lewagang of Minjay

A ridge near Minjay village, Lhuntse, in eastern Bhutan is filled with stones and rocks with holes. The local people believe Khandro Yeshey Tshogyal had used these stones as utensils (*torzhong*) for making *tshog* offering. There is a seat of Guru Rimpoche imprinted on rock, water bowl, and a place where *tshog* was kneaded. However, this religious explanation does not conform to the root name, *lewa*, which means *tshom*. The local people call the place Lewagang, a hillock of *tshom*, a huge round wooden mortar used for pounding paddy into rice. Minjay and the village across the Kurichu known as Tangmachu can be considered the rice bowl of Lhuntse district. The nature of state taxation system in Bhutan followed the regional

specialisation in agriculture, arts, craft, and other skills. It could be possible that the local people might have used these stones to husk paddy into rice. It is believed there are 108 such stones.



Figure 5: One of the 68 bowls found scattered along slopes in Minjey, Lhuntse; Photography by Dorji Gyeltsen, 2011.

Chorten of Sha Raza Wog

When an ancient chorten, perhaps the oldest chorten in Bhutan known as ‘Chorten of Sha Raza Wog’ in Wangdi Phodrang was being renovated towards the end of the 19th century, workers found a relic and a document written in the Indian script (*lentsa*) by Arjun, a student of Nagarjuna. The document explained the story behind the chorten. It was built in the early part of the century by an Indian Prince who came to Bhutan with a tooth of Buddha Kashyapa (*’od srung*), the third of the six Buddha who appeared in the world before the Sakyamuni. There the prince built the chorten with the tooth as the main relic. Both the tooth relic and document fell in the hands of Desi Jigme Namgyal who passed them to his son Ugyen Wangchuck,

the first king of Bhutan. At present both the relics are with the central monastic body, and the treasure is revealed to the public on auspicious days (Dawa Lhamo, 2008).

Explored Sites

The Stone Dome of Batpalathang

In 1998 workers came across a dome-shaped underground stone structure (5.3 meters high) filled with sediments 1.5 meters below the surface while digging the foundation of an agronomy institute at Batpalathang in Bumthang. Further excavation resulted in three additional finds: structure of a partly exposed stone wall 1.2 metres in width and 26.5 metres in length which is believed to have been used as a fort wall; a platform-like structure surrounded by a peripheral stone wall, encompassing a trapezoid surface, believed to have been used for rituals; and a structure believed to be a tower foundation. Pottery remains were unearthed inside 2.8 x 2.5 metre square chamber of the platform structure. Carbon dating of charcoal and cinder (sample found inside the dome) in the laboratory in Miami (Bet Analytic, Inc Miami, Florida) revealed them to be 665-980 years AD Cal with 95% probability and 700-890 years AD with 68% probability (Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad, 2000).

The Drapham Dzong

Excavation of Drapham Dzong is the first archaeological excavation of a large historic site in Bhutan done by the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad. It became an excavation cum excavation training for the Bhutanese. Located in the upper Chokor valley of Bumthang, Chokhor Deba, the ruler of the valley and a contemporary of Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), is believed to have built Drapham Dzong. With excavated area coverage of about 200m by 60m in width, it is believed to be the

largest structure in Asian Buddhist countries, and the largest Dzong predating the Zhabdrung era. It is believed that the Chokhor Deb himself blew up the dzong as he abandoned it to escape the Tibetan invasion.



Figure 6: Drapham Dzong after the excavation; Photography by Kuenga Wangmo, 2014.

Skeleton parts like skull and jaw fragments of sheep, pigs, and cattle; iron arrowheads and non-ferrous metal bangle; and ceramic fragments were excavated. According to radiocarbon dating result, it was built in the second half of the 16th century with its upper castle built between 1550 and 1700.

Potential Exploration Sites

Iron Castle Without Doors

It could be a Bhutanese equivalent of the city of Troy. Just like the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) who

excavated the legendary city of Troy to establish links between Homer's legend and actual historical events, the legendary iron castle of Bumthang is a potential excavation site. Known as Chakhar Gomed (lcags mkhar sgo med: Dooless Iron Castle), it was built, according to the legend, by Chakhar King (King Sindhu), a refugee king from India. It had nine storeys without doors, and could be entered through an underground passage. It was he who invited Guru Padmasambhava to Bhutan in 737-8 CE. *Life of King Sindha [Chakhar Gyalpo] and the Clear Mirror of Prediction* describes the castle:

In the centre of the royal compound is a castle without gates, which is entered by an underground passage. The passage has five levels, each of which is entered via a big gate built of the five precious metals (gold, silver, copper, tin and iron). Furthermore, this fortress has eight hundred embrasures, or loop holes, and thirty flag staffs, each having nine steps, one of these being of gold, its copper point embellished with gold and turquoise. On the banners, savages and cannibals are depicted [to frighten the enemies]. From the pinnacles hang copper chains with tinkling bells of gold and silver [3a]. One beam of roof is painted with gold, one with silver, one with copper, one with iron, one with turquoise. Another beam of the roof is decorated with [precious stone] Mu-men and another with the eye-stones (*gz'i*). One beam of the roof is covered with shells, one with corals. Thus, if sun and moon are shining [on the roof of this castle], the whole country begins to radiate like a rainbow in the sky.

If one enters the castle from outside, [one sees] treasures all around. In a hundred treasuries, all the treasures of the world are hidden. The castle has two big outer gates. One of this strongly fortified castle faces the river, the other looks to the west (Yonten Dargay, 2009, pp. 20-21).

According to the legendary biography of King Sindha, Singgala of Kapalivastu banished one of his three sons, Kunjom, to a country called Sindhu near Bhutan. He later became the King of Sindhu. But a king called Nawoche (*sna bo che*, meaning a big nose) soon attacked him. Defeated, the King of Sindhu escaped to Bhutan accompanied by his followers, founded a new kingdom in Bumthang in the beginning of the 8th century and built a nine-storeys castle.

Some years later, Nawoche invaded his new kingdom. During war, King Sindhu desecrated his gods and temples for failing to protect his son Tala Mebar who was killed by Nawoche. The gods avenged the king for his sacrilegious acts by taking over his life force (*srog*) and he fell ill. Guru Padmasambhava was invited to cure him and make peace with Nawoche. The king was finally cured and the truce was finally signed at a place called Nabji (oath village) where both kings took oaths to keep the peace. Both the kings placed their hands a stone pillar (*sna do*) at Nabji village in central Bhutan and pledged their friendship.

Nine Storeys Underground Fortress of Bangsho

One important potential excavation site is the underground fortress of Bangsho in Lhuntse, eastern Bhutan. Bangsho, a descendant of Lhasay Tsangma, is believed have built this supposed nine-storeys underground fortress. The concrete flat stone roof of the fortress merges with a hillock containing the castle. The first floor (from the surface) was excavated by Lhuntse district administration in 1990s, and a clay pot, two metallic vessels, and stone vessel found during the excavation are now in the National Museum of Bhutan. According to Ugyen Pelgen, Bangsho's elder brother agreed to divide the property of their father who was the king of Khalingkhar in eastern Bhutan on the condition that he would migrate to other places. Bangsho came to Lhuntse with all the riches and built the underground fortress to protect himself and his wealth from the Tibetan marauders. He escaped the Tibetans many times until he was deceived by a local woman, after which he was killed and his underground fortress looted. A belief that Bangsho was reborn as a giant snake to guard his wealth inside the fortress has kept the people away, and it has not been touched until the top floor was excavated in the 1990s (Ugyen Pelgen, 2003, pp. 51-91).



Figure 7: Opening to the Bangtsho Underground Fortress; Photography by Kuenga Wangmo, 2014.



Figure 8: Inside the Bangtsho Underground Fortress; Photography by Kuenga Wangmo, 2014.

The Castle Ruins of Lhasay Tsangma

The story of Lhasay Tsangma, the exiled Tibetan prince, is one of the early themes of the history of Bhutan. Tsangma was exiled to the south (Bhutan) by his younger brother Lang Darma (reigned: 838-841). He travelled across Bhutan and finally settled in Jamkhar in eastern Bhutan (Aris, 1984). Most of the noble families of eastern Bhutan trace their ancestry to him. He is believed to have lived in a castle of Tsenkhar (*btsan mkhar*) in Lhuntse, eastern Bhutan. However, the results of carbon dating of wood samples (using C14 methods) placed the date of the harvesting of the wood to the period 1420-1435 (with 1-sigma or 68% probability) or 1305-1460 (with 2-sigma or 95% probability) (Ardussi, 2007). The ruin of his other castle, Mizimpa at Jamkhar in Trashigang in eastern Bhutan is another site that could be excavated.



Figure 9: Ruins of Tsenkhar Castle, Photo by John Ardussi

Burial Graves of Mazang Daza

In August 2004, a farmer's plowshare in Masang Daza village in Lingmithang in eastern Bhutan hit a stone structure that happened to be a burial grave. Subsequently, 20 tombs were discovered. The land was formerly used as pastureland but settled only in early 1980s. The tomb measuring 5 feet by 18 inches by 14 inches is located on the left bank of Moiri River and near the ruins of the castle of Tongphu King (c.113-115) who was a descendant of Lhasay Tsangma. The ruins of the Zhonggar Dzong are also near the site. The Bhutanese bury the dead only in exceptional case.



Figure 10: Burial Graves of Masang Daza, Mongar; Photo by Ugyen Pelgen.

Conclusion

What I have attempted in this short paper is to explain the state of archaeology in Bhutan and the prospect of archaeological research in the country. Archaeology has suddenly taken a big step with the government's decision to excavate Drapham dzong. The government is working to institutionalise archaeology within the bureaucracy and academic institutions with the assistance from the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLSA, 2000). In 2016 the Royal Thimphu College will offer Bachelors in Anthropology in which study of archaeology will be an integral part of the course.

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