

An Ethno-Archaeological Investigation into Irrigation Agriculture and Water Systems in Mid-Western Nepal

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History of the Mid-Western region from XIIth to XVIIIth Century

The Malla Kingdom

The kingdom had two seats of government from where royal decrees were issued, Dullu in the Dailekh district and Sija in the Jumla district. A copper-plate grant of a Malla king known as Krachulla is found Balesvar, Kumaon, it is dated Saka 1145 (1223 A. D) and was issued from Dullu; it records the king's conquest of Kartipara in the sixteenth year of his reign. It provides the first definite date for the Malla kingdom.

The Malla kingdom also included the Western Tibetan provinces of Guge and Purang which must have been conquered by its founder, Nagaraja himself, for the tradition of these kings in the Tibetan chronicles is maintained from this time on. The annexation of the Tibetan territory

shows the extent of the Khasa power and also the wide dispersion of the Pahadi caste-groups even into the trans-Himalayan zones.

Buddhism appears to have been a popular religion of the kingdom in the early years. The kings from Krachulla to Pratapmalla seem to have a greater bias for Buddha and his religion. Nevertheless Brahmanical religion did not suffer a total eclipse. In the latter years it was definitely in ascendancy.

With Pratapmalla, Nagaraja's line came to an end. The throne of Nagaraja went to Punymalla of the Pala house, who adopted the Malla suffix of his predecessors, as soon as he ascended it. His only records found so far, consist of two copper-plate grants both issued from semja in Saka, 1258 (1336 A. D.) and Saka 1259 (1337 A. D.). These are partly in the vernacular language. These copper-plates thus contain the earliest written evidence of the Nepali language.

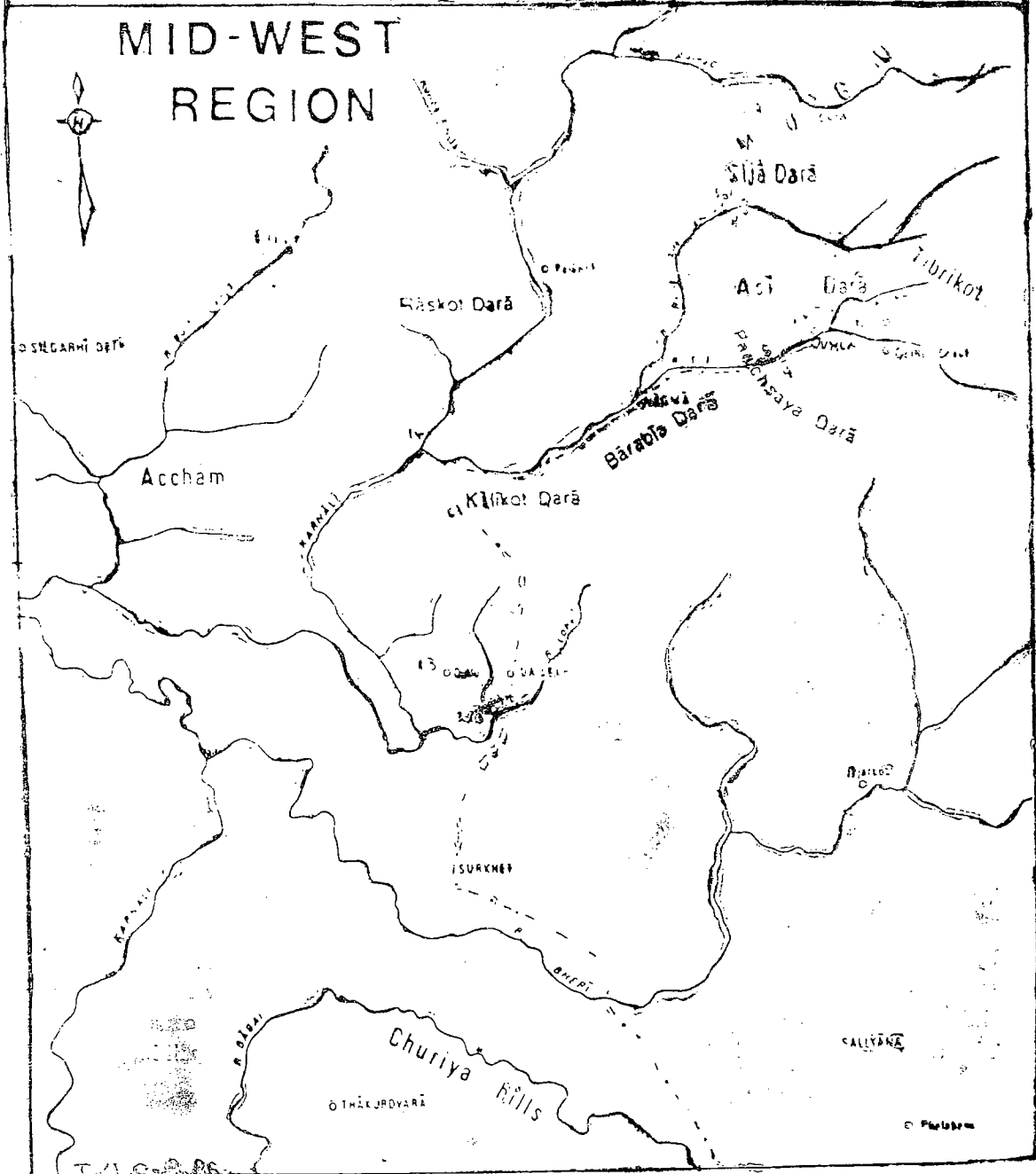
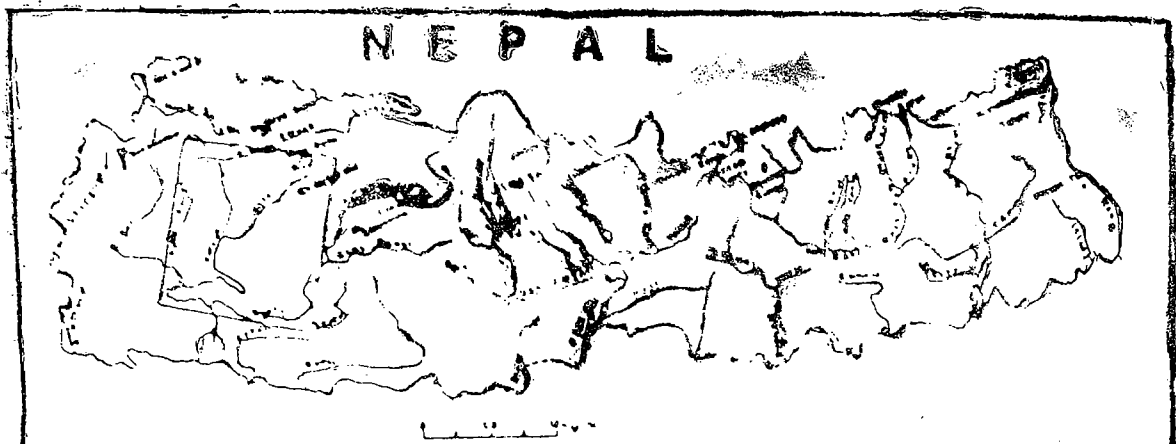


FIG 1

--- Type Route

The gods invoked in the inscription in order to ensure perpetuity of the land-grant, show that the same honour is bestowed on the Brahmanical gods as to the Buddhist. Many inscriptions tell of a remarkable spirit of harmony and acceptance between the two faiths, propagated by the rulers of the kingdom with the least prejudice.

The Malla power was growing from the time of Jitari and reached its zenith in the time of Prithimalla. The largest number of inscriptions belong to this last king who ruled from 1338-1358 A. D., his kingdoms in the east went as far as Mustang.

By 1376 Purang and Guge were lost by the Mallas. The Tibetans who regained control over these two regions stopped acknowledging their suzerainty.

The Twenty-Two Kingdoms (Baisi)

The Malla kingdom soon disintegrated after Abhayamalla and was divided into small principalities controlled by local rulers. Soon after we hear about three rulers with full imperial titles in three separate regions: Semja, Sunargaon and Dailekh.

As the period proceeds more and more small states arise. It should be noted though that the chiefs of the Baisi states were members of either Kalyal or Raskotis families of the Thakuri houses.

Whether all the lacuna in the historical account between the decline of the Malla kingdom and the Baisi states can even be filled is a moot question. We are not even

sure whether the term Baisi denotes only an imaginary number designating the numerous political centres which grew up in this region after the fall of Mallas or refers to an exact number of historical entities. Hamilton lists the states in his book, which is the only serious work to deal with the history of the regions situated outside the Kathmandu Valley. Examples of these states include Dang, Chilli, Dalu-Dailekh and Doli, see Fig. 1. All the states were conquered by Gorkha in 1789 and 1790 A. D.

Preface

Problem Orientation

The major problem with the Mid-Western region is the almost complete lack of fieldwork, only recently has the area been properly mapped. After a lengthy discussion with the Archaeology Department in Kathmandu it became clear the approach I should adopt for the report. I should seek to solve the basic lack of source material. The Nepali archaeologists felt that it would be of most use to them if I could produce a report with as much detail and description as possible along with preliminary interpretations of the evidence. This I have attempted to do.

Motivations, Methodology and Problems

The lack of fieldwork provides many problems but equally as many challenges. There can be little doubt that the area is archaeologically rich (Sharma, 1972, 11). The challenges and the hopeful archaeological rewards were my main motivations for doing

the project. The fieldwork was carried out over a period of two months in summer 1985, see Fig. 1.

The surveys of the field monuments were done by use of a plane table and accompanying equipment. The photographs came from two OM10 cameras, one containing black and white film, the other colour. All the drawings are my own work. In classifying and dating the rural monuments I am following the same rules observed by Sharma in his dating and classification of the art and architecture of the Karnali Basin of Western Nepal. I found that Navaharinath dating and classification was also helpful. It should be noted though that not all scholars agree that village monuments can be so readily fitted into a dynastic system of classification. Of the other sources I use in my work I regard Tucci as most helpful and reliable generally.

The question of how the irrigation agriculture systems functioned is best done using an ethno-historical approach. I think this approach is valid because there is cultural continuity between the Malla period in the Mid-Western region and the present day. For example, Thakuris caste occupying an intermediate position between the dihetris at one end and the Bramins at the other. Thakuri houses in the region like Kalgab and the Raskotis or such sites of theirs as Singhs Vivputs, Raikas and the Chands which were certainly present in Malla period and are still found widely over the region today.

There has been some change, but what change can be seen is relatively minor, for example Bun po and high Buddhism and

Hinduism have declined (i. e. decline of temples in the region). Buddhism and Hinduism though have continued to exist in their primitive forms, for example wooden deities. The living together of two socio-economic groups, the Khasa Tibetans under a single political authority has produced instances of aculteration. The Mallas borrowed the holy chant of the Om mani padme hum in the epigraphs, similarly as they borrowed the form of Tibetan chortens. The spur on which the Malla palace stood at Semja is still called Iamathada. The rock selters around Sija yielded round clay tablets inscribed with sacred chants which are known as Bhote gomba. The village of Lekhpur not far from Sija, whose inhabitants consist of Budachhetris as their cult gods Lama-visnu, who are said to be brothers in relation.

There are accounts of trade, pilgrimage and artistic exchange in oval traditions in the area and many of these activities are still practiced, for example the Pahadi caste groups undertake an arduous pilgrimage to high monastic centres in Tibet. In the same way the Tibetans came down to pay homage to the shrines of Sirasthan, Nathaksthan and Padukasthan as far down as Dullu. Trade between the Padis and Bhotiyas has existed from very early days, the latter exchanging salt, the former food grains. Salt and food grains were carried and are still being carried to and fro in small bags of goat skin strapped across the backs of sheep. Accounts of the exchange of these bags are contained in many stories, related to Sharma in Gum in Mugu.

There were of course problems with the fieldwork. The area is extremely difficult.

to travel in as there are no roads. Climbing equipment was essential and twice I found myself in difficulty due to altitude. Bandits were also a problem in the central area. The interpreter with me had difficulty due to variants in local dialects, the problem was

helped by UMN mission in Jumla who were experienced with the local Nepali language. Our party caused much attention and as a result surveying was often particularly difficult due to the Nepalese' curiosity.

(To be continued)