

Introduction

In 1985 I undertook my first journey to the southern Mustang and the Muktinath valley in search of historical documents related to that area. One of the things I came across there that impressed me most was the great number of caves dug into the hills on the northern bank of the Dzong-river. These caves can easily be seen by any pilgrim or tourist, who travels from the banks of the Kaligandaki up to the holy shrine of Muktinath. Since no information about these caves could be obtained from the local informants, I ventured a short exploration trip from Dzarkot to the cave systems below the Dzong-village. My first view on these caves convinced me that they were constructed by men, who might have lived there or used them for storage of their goods. One bigger cave had painted walls. There were several caves that were closed by walls or connected by small paths. Traces of human activities, however, could be seen everywhere.

In 1986 and 1987 I made several other trips to Nepal. Thanks to the company of Prof. R. Bielmeier, Dr. C. Cueppers and Dr. Schmidt it was possible for me to undertake a first very preliminary survey of the said cave-systems below the Dzong-village with the aim to obtain more information about them. The results will be published in one of the coming issues of the Ancient Nepal.

Back in Kathmandu I was convinced that we had explored the remnants of an old culture and civilisation, which had been completely forgotten and which was important enough to be studied

extensively. On the prospects of realizing a research project I first had talks with Dr. Harka Gurung. He not only encouraged me to pursue this venture, but also drew my attention to a rockcutcave burial site discovered in Chokhopani, a place above the left bank of the Kaligandaki near Tukche. Moreover, Dr. Harka Gurung had collected first sight information about the cave-systems in the northern Mustang during his trip to this area. He kindly gave me access to his records and photos of these caves. I have to acknowledge with gratitude that without the encouragement of Dr. Harka Gurung, I would not have tried to enact this project.

Subsequently, I held official talks with Ramesh Jung Thapa, the then Secretary in the Ministry of Education of His Majesty's Government, Dr. Saphalya Amatya, the then Acting Director General of the Department of Archaeology and Janak Lal Sharma, the retired Director of that department. Due to their favourable response to my plans I submitted to His Majesty's Government in January 1989 a research proposal for a joint Nepal-German archaeological project concerning high mountain archaeology on prehistoric dwellings in the Mustang area. The text of this proposal is attached at the end of this introduction.

Subsequently, an agreement between the Department of Archaeology and the Coulfeld-Meisezahl Institute (Bonn) was drafted and signed in November 1991. In May 1992 the actual work of the Nepal-German project on High-Mountain

Archaeology started. The project was and is able to pursue its programme with the financial aid granted by the German Research Society.

From the beginning of the project it was clear to me that the archaeological findings can be understood properly only in a wider context of knowledge of the historical, geographical, cultural and anthropological patterns. Moreover, to understand the origination and disappearance of the cave-civilisation of Mustang it has to be studied in the context of general settlement history of the area concerned. For these reasons the project was started from the very beginning with the participation of specialists in the field of architecture, geography, history and anthropology.

The project has now become able to submit the first reports on its findings to the Department of Archaeology. These reports are published in this volume and we hope to publish more in subsequent issues as well of the Ancient Nepal. Most probably some of our early propositions may not come out true. That counts especially on our early suggestions about the age of the cave-civilisation, albeit the date of 800 B.C. has recently been established by the work of Dr. A. Simons and her team. The same holds good of the connections recently established between the Chokhopani culture of the rockcutcave burial sites and the caves of the Muktinath valley.

- Dieter Schuh

The Text of the Proposal

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29.1.1989

To
The Department of Archaeology
Ministry of Education
His Majesty's Government
Kathmandu/Nepal

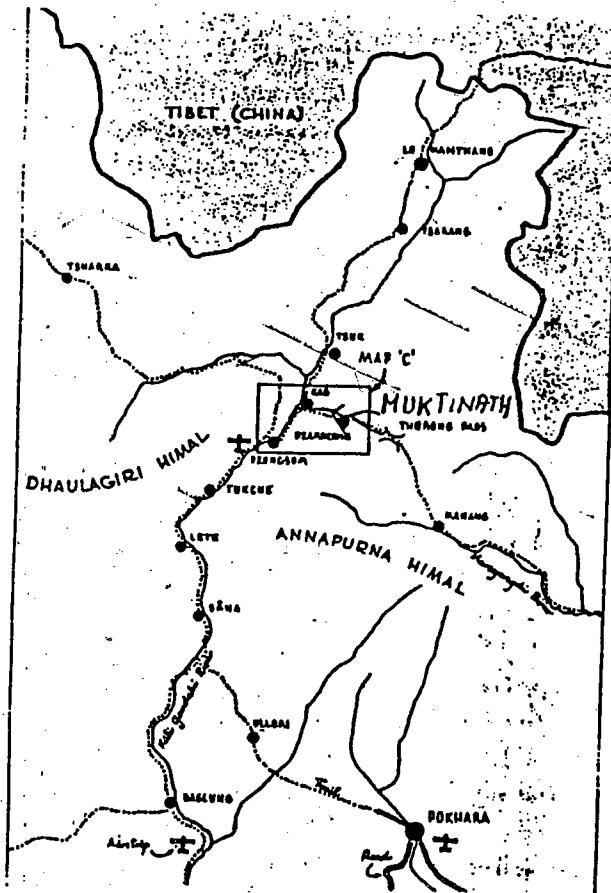
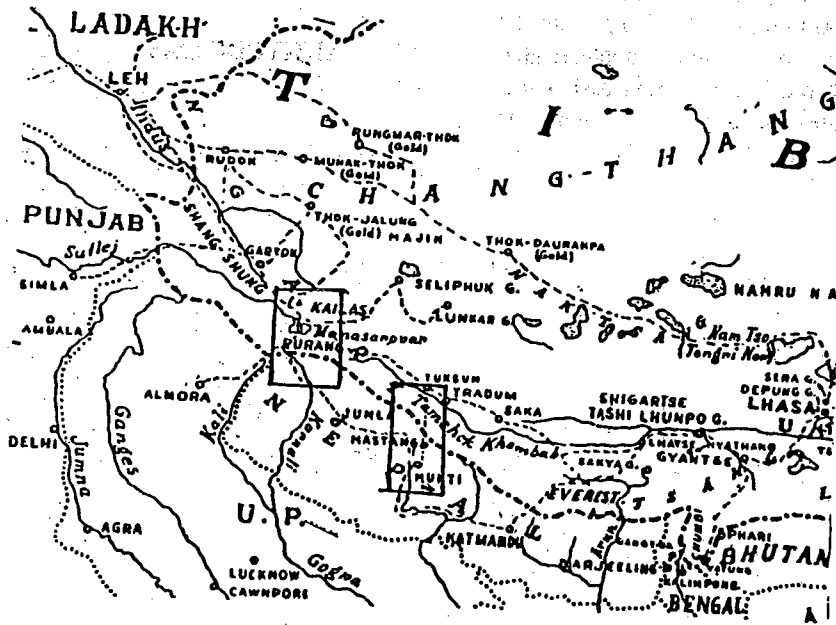
RESEARCH PROPOSAL
JOINT NEPAL-GERMAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT
HIGH MOUNTAIN ARCHAEOLOGY ON PREHISTORIC DWELLINGS IN THE
MUSTANG ZONE

PREAMBLE

High mountain archaeology in the Himalayas is the search for the prehistoric man, who lived in high altitude areas above three thousand meters more than two thousand years ago. Very little

research has been done on the prehistoric man and his culture in these areas although the enormous traces of his civilisation in form of huge cave dwellings settlements are still existent in different parts of the Himalayas.

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A joint study and research group of research scholars from Nepal and Germany has decided to devote itself to the ambitious task of exploring the history and culture of a highly sophisticated civilisation which is entirely forgotten and which dominated the routes between Nepal and the Tibetan highlands in the area of the Mustang Zone more than 2000 years ago.

The project will contribute essentially to our knowledge of the origin of the population of present Nepal.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The systematic research in high mountain archaeology of the Himalayas is still in its very beginning.

Sporadic work was undertaken by Chinese scholars in eastern Tibet, where neolithic settlements were discovered and excavated in 1978 and 1979.

During the last years a joint Pakistani-German study group under the guidance of Prof. Jettmar from Heidelberg University undertook a systematic exploration survey of archaeological sites and ancient rock-carvings along the Karakorum highway.

Other discoveries were fortuitous results of construction work for water channels of electrical power plants. The most important discovery of this type was the finding of a megalithic rockcutcave burial site near Tukche. These findings were described in detail by Devendra Nath Tiwari in his remarkable article "Cave Burials from Western Nepal, Mustang" (In: Ancient Nepal, Number 85, pp. 1 - 12). In his article D.N. Tiwari points out that the major obstacle to the progress of research on the prehistory of Nepal is the lack of systematic excavations and he remarks: "The pre-history of Nepal is such as is based essentially on objects

found by chance or on those remains which have survived."

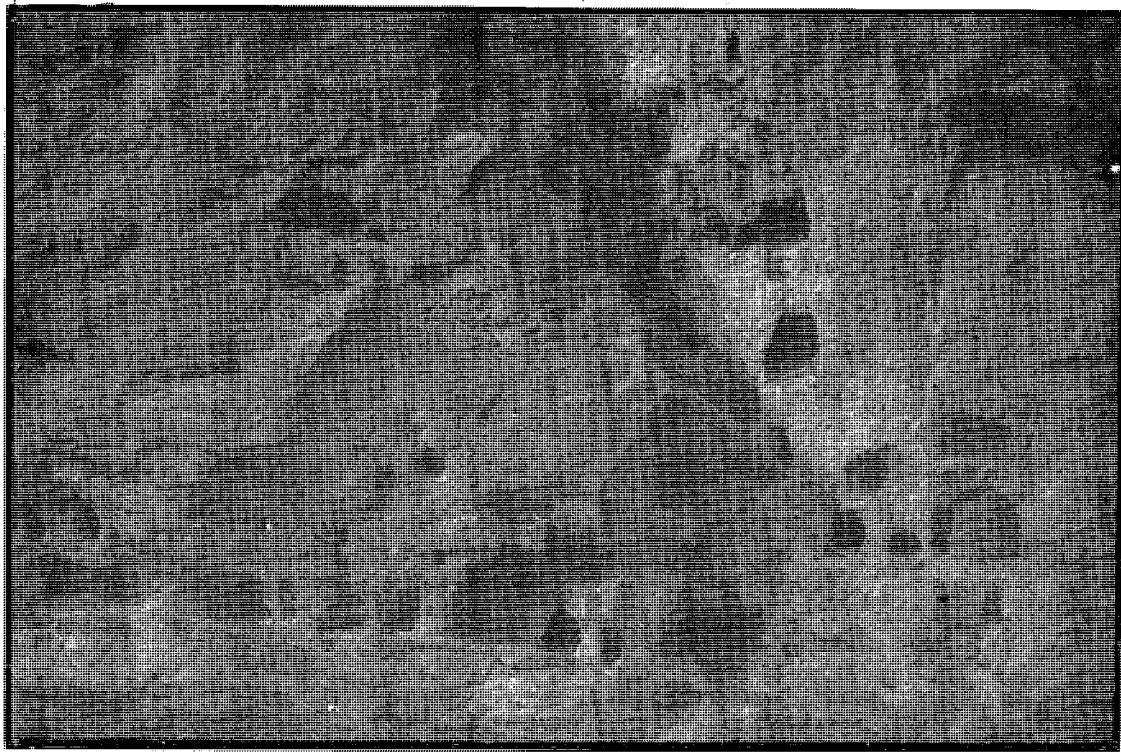
2. HIGH ALTITUDE CAVE-SETTLEMENTS IN NEPAL

In his book on Western-Tibet, published under the title Kailash-Manasarovar, the Indian scholar Swami Pranavananda gives the description of an area, which is situated south of the holy Kailash and commonly known as Purang. About this area which is formed by a valley of the river Karnali, Swami Pranavananda writes:

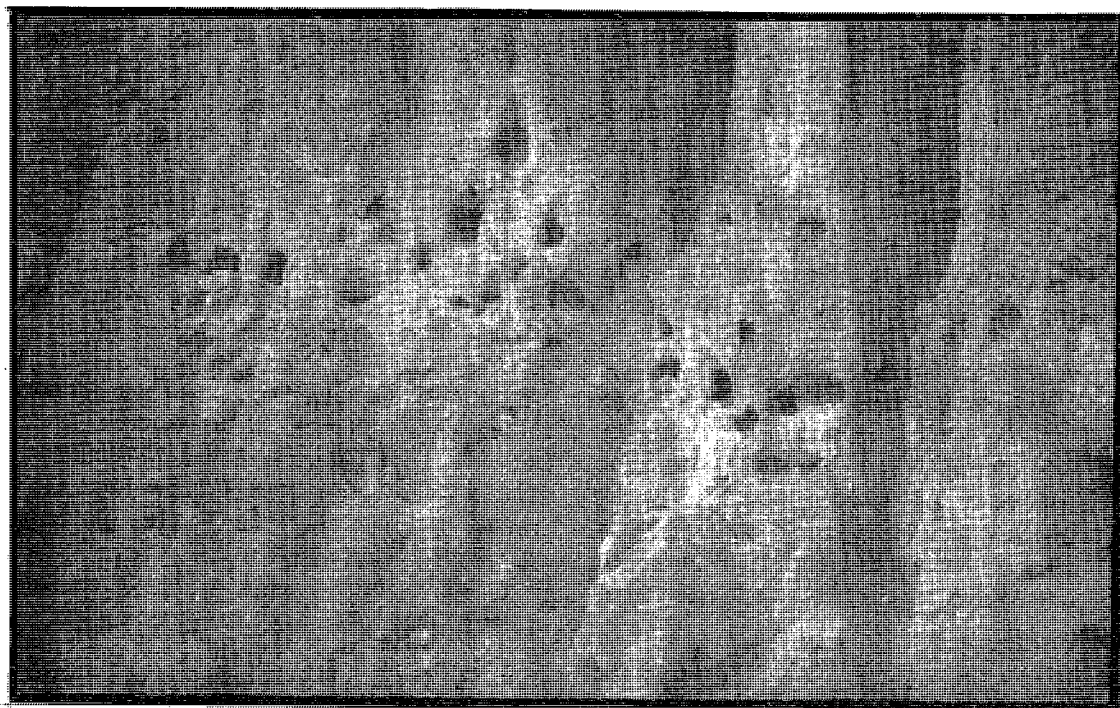
"A part of the population of Purang lives also in caves dug into the conglomerate walls of hills which are made into regular houses by the construction of walls and gates in the front side. Some caves are even two or three-storeyed high."

Swami Pranavananda mentions numerous cave settlements which were completely deserted and which consisted of hundreds of caves. Similar observations referring to the same area were made and published by Lama Anakarika Govinda in 1966 and by a China-Japan joint friendship expedition in 1986. Nobody ever did undertake any research into the origin and history of these settlements of an enormous size. Their origin and history is even now-a-days completely unknown.

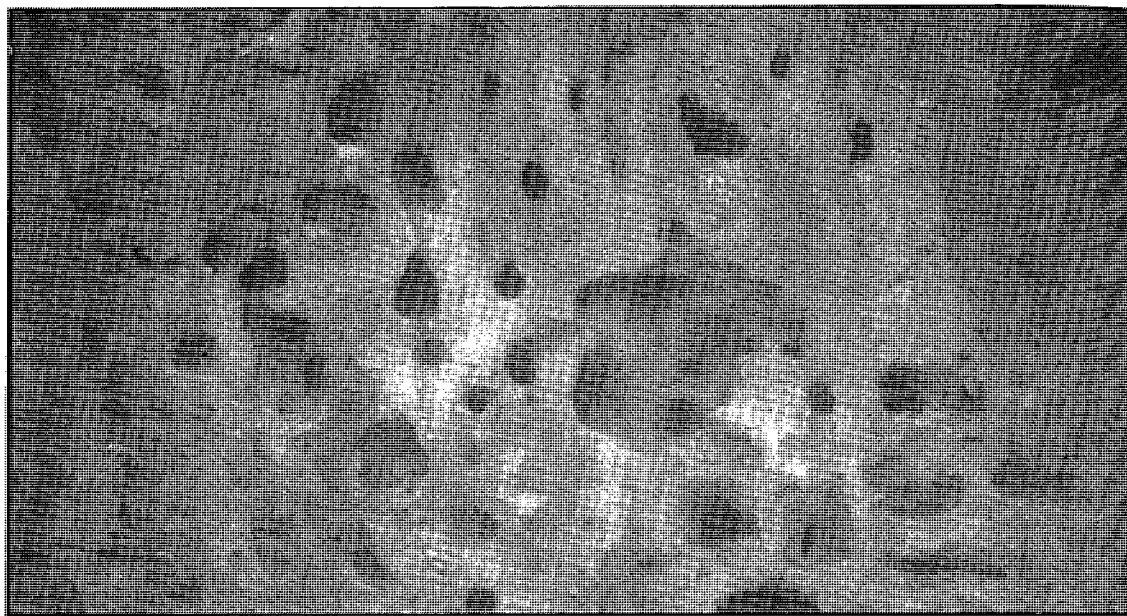
If we remain in an area of the same altitude as Purang but turn to the west for about 300 km into the territory of Nepal, we reach the area of the Kali Gandaki river in the Mustang-district in Nepal. Here in a similar environment we again find huge systems of cave settlements. These settlements were observed and briefly described by G. Tucci and other scholars. The first caves can be found 20 km north of Tukche near Kagbeni on both sides of the Kali Gandaki river. Numerous caves are easily found in the Muktinath valley. A preliminary survey undertaken by Mr. Harka Gurung during his journey to Mustang reveals that these cave



Upper Muktinath - Valley: Cave System C



Upper Muktinath - Valley: Cave System D



Upper Muktinath - Valley: Cave System B

dwelling are found in a great number in the whole area of Mustang up to the Tibetan border.

The caves of the Mustang-district in Nepal are no longer inhabited. The entrances of the caves are mostly inaccessible and can be reached only with special climbing equipment. The population of the surrounding villages does not remember that anybody ever climbed into these caves. Nor can we find any type of folk tales connected to the caves.

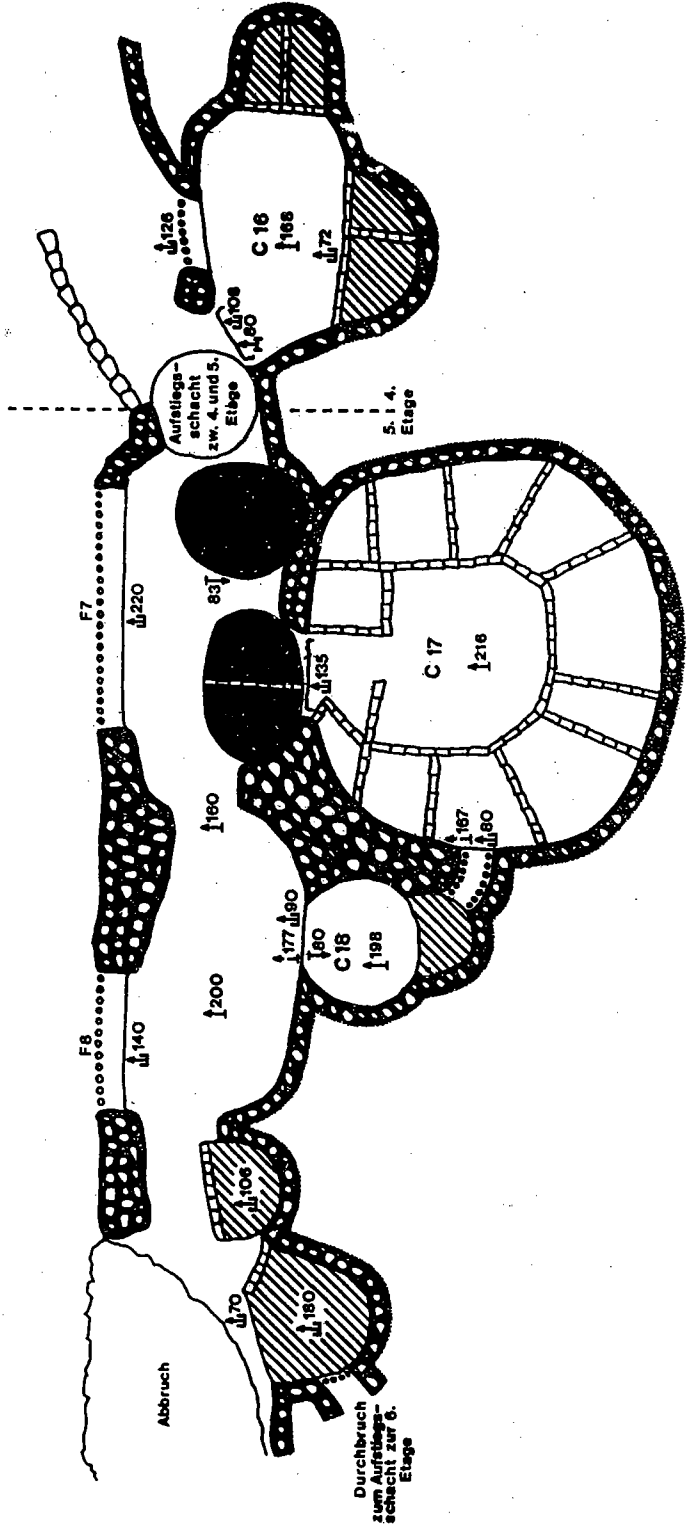
The caves of the Muktinath valley can be divided into two major groups: those of the lower valley up to the village Kyingar and those of the upper valley near the villages Kagbeni and Dzong. A preliminary survey of the caves of the upper valley was undertaken by Prof. Dr. D. Schuh in the years 1986 and 1987. It was the aim of this survey to supply some basic knowledge on the caves and to

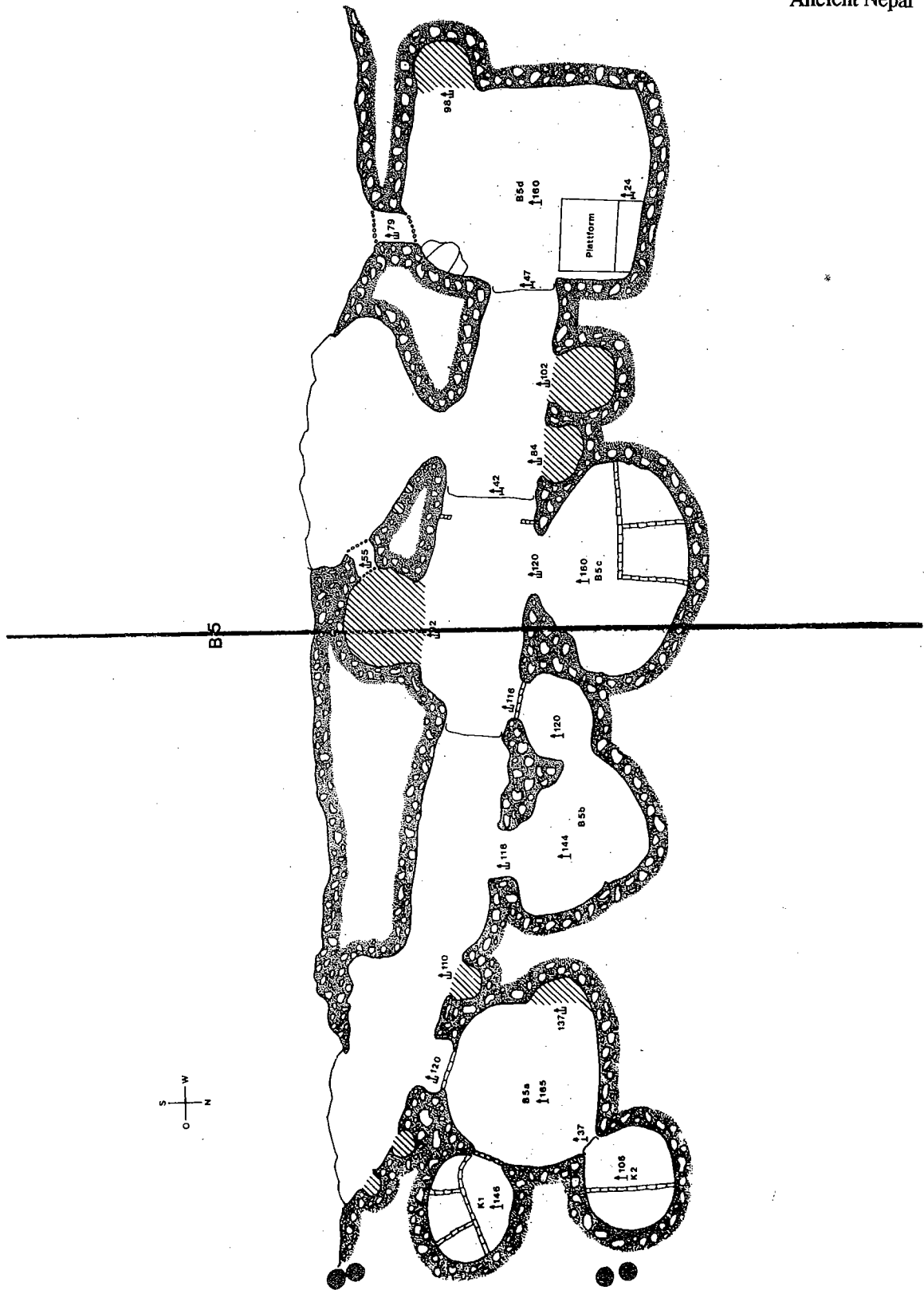
find out, if it was worthwhile, to plan a major archaeological project on these cave settlements.

The exploration work was concentrated on three cave-systems near Dzarkot. The first inspection from the outside revealed, that the caves were marked with many traces of human activities. Some of the entrances to the caves were partially closed by walls. Some of the cave-entrances were connected by small paths, which showed many traces of human constructing activities.

During the exploration it was possible to get access to four cave systems, which were marked as settlements A, B, C and D. It became immediately evident that all caves were by no means natural caves but completely the results of human construction activities. All caves were photographed for the purpose of documentation, measured and drawings of the ground plans were

C16, C17 und C18





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completed. Additionally, more than 25 samples of organic materials were collected for the purpose of radio carbon dating. A preliminary report of the findings is under preparation and will be published soon.

Here only a short summary of the most important findings can be given.

The cave settlements represented separate entities with similar structure but different size. The biggest settlement was system C, which consisted of more than thirty caves in seven storeys.

The lower storeys were always used for the purpose of dwelling. In settlement C, the storeys 1 - 3 consisted completely of dwelling-caves. The middle storeys were obviously storage caves. In these storeys the caves generally comprised small, walled chambers for the storage of grain. For demonstration we add the ground plans of 4th and the fifth floor of settlement C. The caves C 17 and C 18 show clearly, how these chambers were constructed. Additional storage capacity derived from holes of different size. The uppermost floor always comprised a very small cave which was difficult to enter. Most probably it contained originally the sanctuary of the settlements.

The organic samples from the bricks of the storage-chamber revealed that some of these chambers were constructed between 600 and 100 B.C.. Organic samples taken from a wall-construction between two caves in cave-system D revealed, that this wall may have been constructed about 4000 B.C..

This means that the cave-settlements of the Muktinath-valley may be more than 6000 years old. The caves of the Muktinath-valley are the oldest human settlements found in the whole area of the Himalaya up to now.

3. AIM OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The aim of the planned archaeological project is the systematic exploration of the history and culture of the cave-settlements and their original population in the Mustang district. The structure of the caves show clearly that they were constructed and used by men having a highly sophisticated civilisation and culture.

A number of additional important questions should be answered:

1. Are the inhabitants of the caves in the Mustang district the Kiratas from the caves mentioned in a very old Vedic text ?
2. Are there direct connections between the people of the Neolithic tombs near Tukche and the cave-settlements ?
3. Is there any direct connection between the famous ancient Proto-Tibetan West-Himalayan kingdom of Zhanzhung and the cave-settlements ?
4. The political entity of the cave-settlements, known under the designation Se-rib, were destroyed in the 7th century by Tibetan armies. Subsequently, the caves were used for different purposes. What is the history of this later usage ?

4. PARTICIPANTS OF THE PROJECT

The project will be headed by experienced experts on the field concerned, who will bear the ultimate responsibility of the project.

From the Nepalese side:

Experts from:

The Department of Archaeology
Ministry of Education

and

Centre for Nepal and-Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur.

From the German side:

Prof. Dr. Dieter Schuh,

Seminar for Central-Asian Studies, Bonn University

and

Prof. Dr. Taute,

Institute for Prehistory, Cologne-University.

The actual fieldwork will be done and supervised by two young Nepalese archaeologists and two young German archaeologists. The persons concerned still have to be selected. As far as the young scholars from Nepal are concerned, it is planned to provide an extra training for half a year in archaeological field work in Germany.

In the initial stage, the coopération of geographers from Nepal will be necessary.

Moreover, it may turn out to be useful to use the help of trained students in the field of archaeology from Nepal and Germany for limited periods.

Last but not least, we propose the formation of an advisory committee for the project. The members of this committee should be appointed at the beginning of the project after consultation of all parties concerned.

5. RESEARCH PLAN

According to our present planning, the project should cover a period of five years. It should be possible to propose an additional extension for a period of five years at a later date.

The actual research work should begin in autumn 1989. While the two Nepalese field researchers should undertake their training in Germany together with their German colleagues, a small team of geographers and photographers from Nepal should travel into Mustang with the aim of a complete cartographic and photographic survey of all existing cave settlements. This survey should supply a preliminary tool for the later choose of excavation sites.

From spring 1990 to autumn 1991 an extensive joint excavation should be undertaken in the lower part of the Muktinath valley. In this excavation all participants should work together. The exact site of the excavation will be fixed by the experts on a later date.

From 1992 to 1993, the Nepalese group of archaeologists should undertake a separate excavation-project in, the northern part of the Mustang district, which is a restricted area and not accessible for their German colleagues. During this time the German participants should concentrate on excavations in the area of Tukche.

Due to practical considerations and climatic restrictions the actual field work should be limited to a period of five months every year.

6. FINANCIAL AND OTHER OBLIGATIONS

Whereas it is expected that all Nepalese colleagues and participants, who are working already in Nepalese institutions, should retain their salaries from His Majesty's Government as before, all other financial obligations will be totally covered by the German side.

We hereby explicitly declare that no additional financial obligations will be required from His Majesty's Government.

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The excavation-project will require the import of necessary scientific equipments from Germany. Therefore, we request His Majesty's Government to grant import-tax exemption for the import of all scientific equipments needed by the project.

In addition to this, we request His Majesty's Government for the permission to open an office of the "Nepal-German Archaeological Project" for the period of five years in Kathmandu. This office will have the purpose to coordinate the research-work of the scientists who participate in the project.

It goes without saying, that all archaeological findings will be deposited ultimately in Nepal according to the decisions taken by His Majesty's Government. Nevertheless, it will be scientifically

necessary to examine a certain number of findings in the prehistoric laboratories in Cologne-University for a limited period of time. For this purpose special permits of His Majesty's Government should be granted.

7. FINAL REMARKS

The aim of the submitted research plan is the archaeological exploration of human caves-settlements of enormous size inhabited in prehistoric times by a population with a highly sophisticated civilisation. The exploration of this civilisation, which may be more than 6.000 years old, will greatly enhance the prestige of Nepal as a cultural nation, which created one of the oldest highly developed civilisations in the world.