

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN MUSTANG

Report on the Fieldwork of the years 1994 and 1995  
done by the Cologne University Team\*

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## I. Report on the 1994 campaign

The excavation in the third year of the project (1994) took place from 1st March to 22nd May.

As in the previous years, our team worked in two regions of the southern Mustang District in Western Nepal:

1. in the funerary caves of Chokhopani in the Thakkhola (near Tukche and Marpha)
2. in the western cave systems, and
3. in the terrace settlement of Mebrak below the cave systems in the upper Muktinath Valley (near Jharkot and Jhong).

### 1. Work on the eroded cave burials of Chokhopani

Continuing the work done the years before (Simons et al- 1994a, 52f; 1994b, 93ff), we investigated the west face of the Chokhopani rock massif facing the Kaligandaki for further remains of funerary caves exposed by erosion (Plate 1).

Already in 1993, we had found a location in the shaft of the down-pipe of the hydroelectric plant, still in use at the time, where bones protruded from the trench

profile. It became apparent that here were the collapsed remains of a funerary cave, probably with two occupation levels. As well as human bones and potsherds - remains of redeposited vessels - animal bones, including yak bones (determined by Prof. A. von den Driesch), were also recovered. These finds indicate that this site, like another about one hundred meters to the north, belongs to the more recent burial phase of the Chokhopani necropolis - dated to approx. 650 calAD - which, during our previous campaign, we found represented among the burial remains in the south face (Simons et al. 1994b, 95f).

While investigating the west face north of the down-pipe shaft, we came upon the remains of several caves. Their man-made nature was not clearly recognisable, but could not be definitely excluded either. Excavation revealed fragments of human bone, sherds of grey Chokhopani pottery and three broken schist points (bodkins) (Fig. 1). The finds date these funerary caves to the first occupation phase of the necropolis around 800 calBC. Consequently, after three years of excavation campaigns, we have evidence that both the west face - with the two down-pipe shafts - and

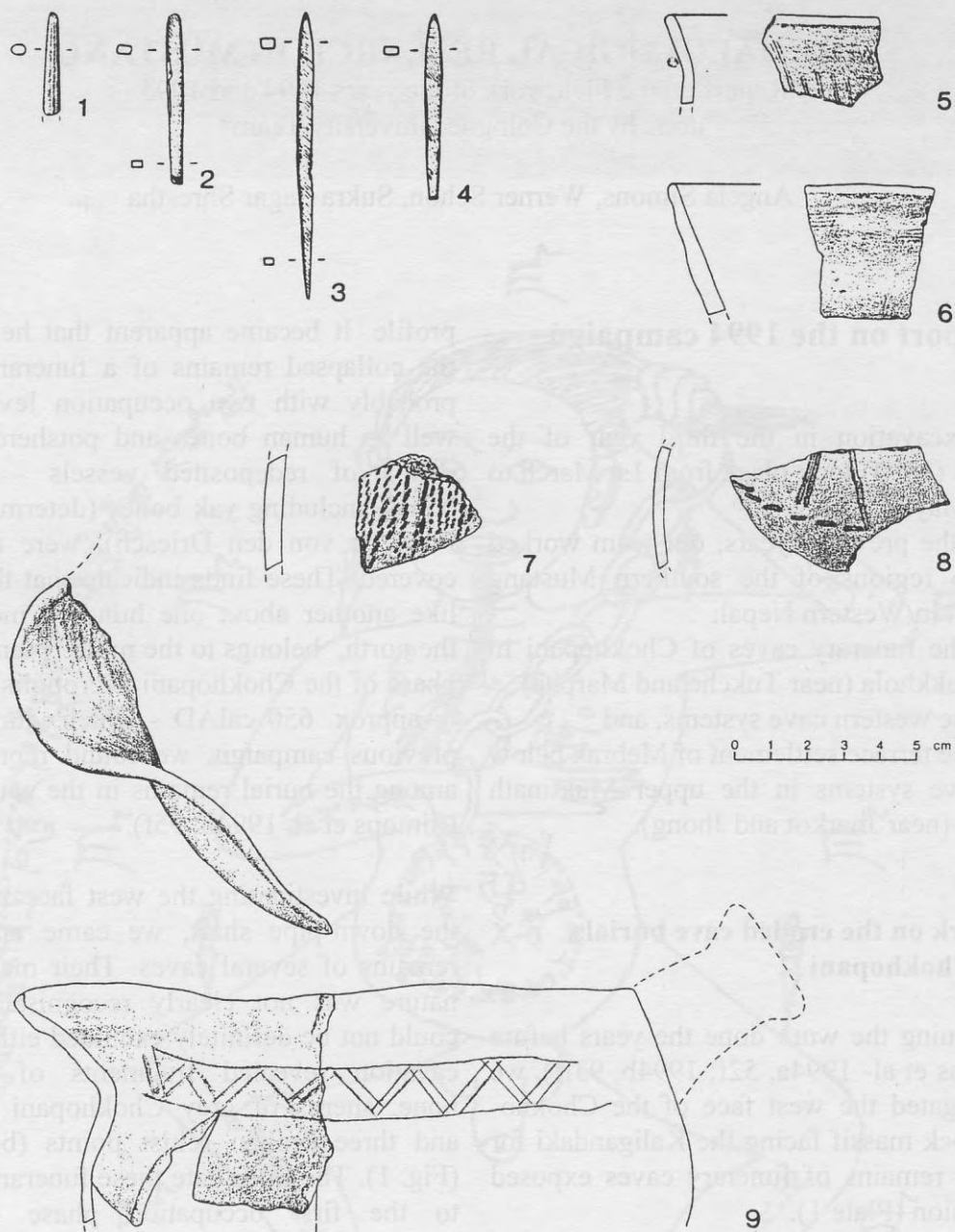


Fig. 1 Chokopani West Face (site 94.1): Points and pottery from the burial caves.

the south face of Chokhopani were used burial sites during two different periods separated by more than one thousand years. In addition, in 1992 and 1993, we were also able to secure traces of settlement from both periods. As the salvaged burial caves are severely eroded, it means that our work is genuine rescue excavation of finds which would otherwise be totally destroyed within the next few years.

The numerous grave goods - some even of museum value - (beads made of carnelian, shell, fayence; copper and bronze bangles; schist bodkins; ceramic vessels) (Simons et al. 1994a, Fig. 4-10.), together with the anthropological analysis of the bones, reveal a culture which lies at the very beginning of the settlement process in the high Himalayas. The relationship of the prehistoric necropolis to the second burial phase, which has been dated to more than a thousand years later, is unclear. The question also arises of what happened in Chokhopani during the time between the two burial phases so far dated by radiocarbon analysis. Further data which would permit an estimate of the duration of the occupation phases will perhaps be able to reduce the gaps. However, it is doubtful that there is cultural continuity. It is interesting to note in this connection that, still today, Chokhopani is used for ritual purposes by the local Thakkhali population (Vinding, pers. comm.).

## 2. Work on the cave systems of Mebrak in the upper Muktinath Valley

The work in "Cave System B" (sites 92.5 and 93.5) was continued and extended to "A-System" to the west (sites 94.2 and 94.3).

In **B-System** we wanted to excavate and record, layer by layer, the floor stratigraphy found in the sixth storey of the eastern section of Location 42 (Simons et al. 1994b, 102 with fig 13-14). The work confirmed that there had been at least three activity phases in this cave section, each characterised by a mud floor surface with settlement debris, with a period of abandonment after the second phase. According to our first data, the settlement of the cave system as recorded in this mud floor stratigraphy was between 1200 and 1600 calAD. The abandonment interval seems to have been around 1300; and - about a hundred years later - this section of the system appears to have been occupied again. As well as numerous potsherds, cereal remains, woven bamboo basket remains and worked pieces of wood, it was possible to salvage several fragments of paper with Tibetan script.

That season, we were able to expose a further stratigraphy at the foot of the western B-System. A flat area below the rock face has been consolidated with a terrace wall: apparently a connecting path and forecourt for the cave settlement. After exposing a profile it was possible to differentiate between several occupation

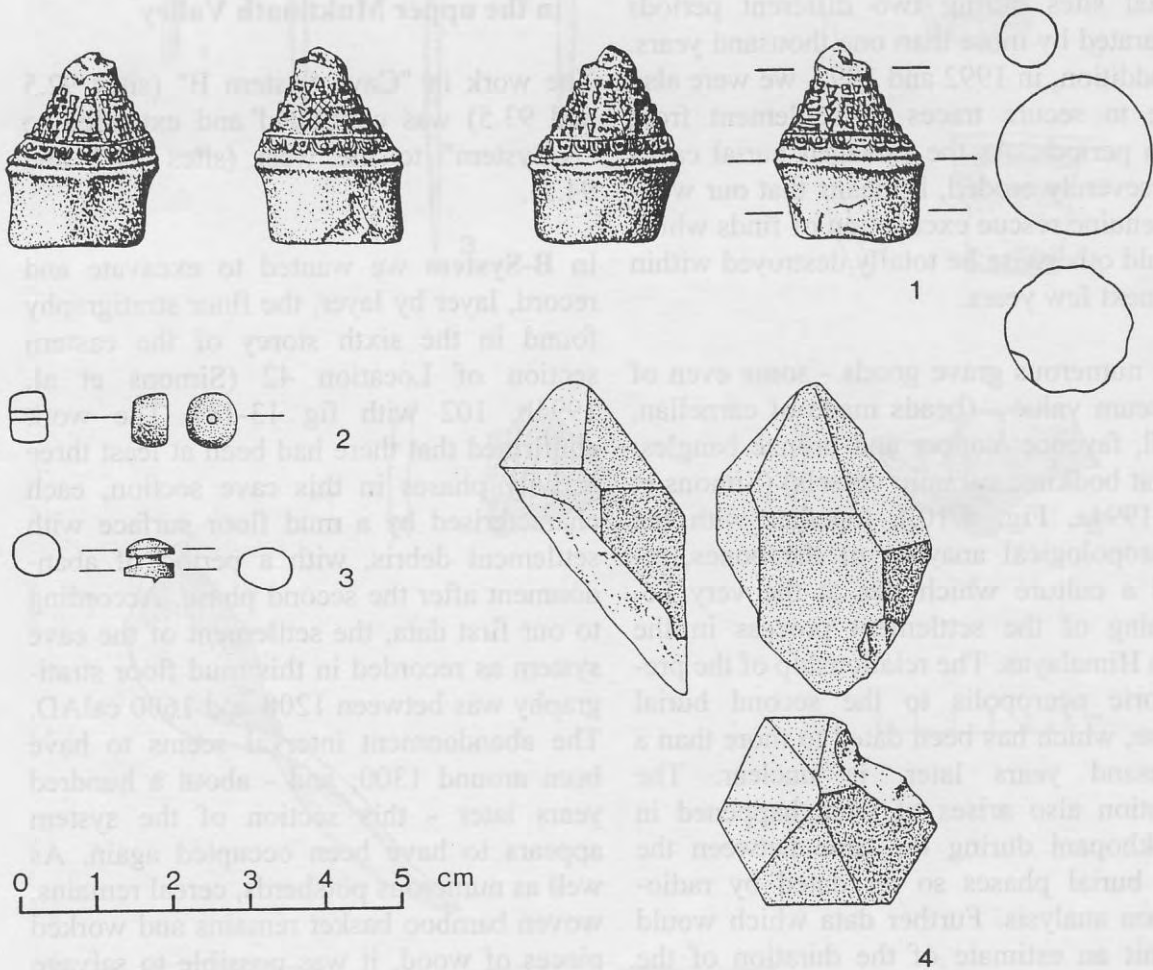


Fig. 2 Mebrak A-System (site 94.2), Location 2: Finds from the floor of the cave.

layers with organic remains, in particular threshing debris, and potsherds which are expected to correspond with the settlement phases of the cave system.

On the western edge of the south-exposed face of the rock massif of Mebrak are the caves of the **A-System**; they are in two groups, adjacent to the western section of the B-System.



The eastern A-System consists essentially of two rows of caves, one above the other. Most of them are severely eroded and some were used for a long time by vultures as a nesting place. Two well-preserved rooms, Locations 2 and 8, could be examined. These cave rooms, too, were eroded at their entrances; in both cases the last inhabitants had built up the broken entrances with a wall, leaving only a door opening. It became apparent that Location 2 had originally had an anteroom which had, however, completely succumbed to erosion except for part of its floor. On the mud-dressed remains of the cave floor, which now only exists as a ledge on the rock face in front of Location 2, were the remains of crushed ceramic vessels.

In the Location 2 cave room itself, a box-shaped mud-brick structure had been preserved in the east corner. Under the collapsed mud bricks in the entrance a hearth came to light plus several finds which indicate that the last inhabitant of this room was probably a buddhist hermit; a stupa-shaped Tsatsa made of baked clay, a piece of rock-crystal probably used as an amulet, a bone button and a shell bead (Fig. 2). Furthermore, there were several heavily eroded iron objects, potsherds and cereal remains.

In Location 8, five niches were arranged radially around the main room. They were originally sealed with mud-brick walls; provisions had been stored in these domed structures. In the centre of the room, under the collapsed material, we were able to uncover an earth floor with a hearth.

The evidence of settlement in these two well-preserved rooms - judging by the ceramic finds - probably comes from the last occupation of the cave system (from around 1300 to 1600AD). A first dendrochronological dating of this last phase points to around 1600 AD, which would suggest that the A-System was abandoned at about the same time as the B-System.

The **Western A-System**, right at the top of the Mebrak range, consists of a series of cave remains lying on either side of an erosion gully. Almost all are severely eroded and some therefore look as though they are natural caves formed by erosion. In order to clarify the question whether they are artificial and were used by humans, trial trenches were dug in some of the rooms. We came upon potsherds and bone fragments which were sometimes within the infill layers of artificially hewn hollows or pits in the rock floor. Surprisingly, the pottery excavated - together with human bones and a carnelian bead - were sherds of vessels of the grey ware which we had met in the first occupation phase of the Chokhopani funerary caves (cf. Fig.1.) (radiocarbon dated to approx. 800-500 calBC). It seemed at that time already most probable that we had discovered a necropolis in Mebrak in the upper Muktinath Valley which is comparable to that of Chokhopani in the Kaligandaki Valley. We were not able to complete the work in the western A-System; in the 1995 campaign, we hoped to find some better-preserved funerary caves. This - in our eyes, sensational - find shows that collective burials in funerary caves like

those in Chokhopani were distributed throughout the whole Mustang area, and are linked with the first occupation of the cave systems. In Mebrak in the upper Muktinath Valley and also in Phudzeling in the lower Muktinath Valley is the earliest evidence in the cave systems in this period. The link with the same burial tradition makes it seem possible that in prehistoric times, around 1000-500 BC, a homogeneous population once lived where several different ethnic groups live today. Perhaps this will help us learn more about the people who first settled in the high mountain area of Mustang and built the first cave systems. Our work in the ruins of Phudzeling and Mebrak shows that already in prehistoric times, around 1000 BC, they had build their settlement on the open areas on the river terraces in front of the rock faces.

### **3. Excavation at Location 6 in the ruins at Mebrak in the upper Muktinath Valley (site 92.5)**

Parallel to the work in the cave system, we continued the 1993 excavation in one of the ruined houses in the deserted settlement on the river terrace in front of B-System (Location 6).

In order to determine the extent of the building, the north wall was followed to both the east and the west. The western end was reached after 1.50 m, where the wall makes a sharp bend and continues towards the north. 3 m along the eastern side of the building, beyond the area excavated in

1993, it joins a feature measuring 2 x 3 m: the wall ends at a huge boulder lying deep in the sediment, on which a mud platform has been built. The platform is bounded on the right-hand side by a low wall and, on the left, by a series of large stones. In the centre is a line of mud bricks which are inserted into the mud platform parallel to the right-hand wall. It is intended to look into the purpose of this feature next year, as the local excavation workers lead us to understand that similar structures could be connected with the processing of cereals. In addition, adjacent to last year's excavation, a partial extension along the east wall towards the south was excavated. As a result, we have now investigated an inner room, walled on three sides, which was obviously entered via a staircase in the south-west corner. The southern boundary of this room consists of a passage only about 1.50 m wide which - continuing further in the eastern area - falls off slightly towards the east. On the northern side, the chronologically later wall of the ruin, still preserved above ground, hinders further investigation.

The extensions of the excavation permit a detailed insight into the chronological utilization of the inside of a building. Thus, beneath the occupation layer dated to 1514 70 calAD, six further mud floors were determined from which samples and finds could be recovered.

In a level layer at the base of this succession of layers, at a depth of 1.50 to 1.80 m below the present-day surface, pottery was found which corresponds with material from the Chokhopani phase funerary caves. This

level layer lies on the natural rock surface and seems to represent the preparation of the foundation for the first construction of the terrace settlement in front of the cave system (Plate 2). The samples at present in the laboratory for radiocarbon analysis will give further information on the duration of the building's utilization and thus provide an insight into the entire development of the settlement in front of the rock face. From all the layers, it was possible to obtain not only sherds of settlement pottery but also plant remains, animal bones and charcoal as well as several corroded iron objects, including an arrow head.

In 1995, it was intended to extend the section and follow the individual walls in order to obtain a larger-scale insight into the structure of the earlier settlement.

## II. Report on the 1995 campaign

Our fieldwork during our campaign in the field took place from March 30th to May 8th 1995.

That year we worked only at the site of Mebrak situated in the upper Muktinath Valley in the South of Mustang District in Western Nepal. As we had worked at this site from 1992 onwards we had a few specific questions which we wanted to try to answer during our excavation in that spring:

1. Concerning the cave systems:

1.1. Did we really hit a Chokhopani-type burial site in the western part of the A-System ?

1.2 Was there any special feature in the uppermost cave of the eastern B-System ?

2. Concerning the terrace settlement:

2.1. Does stratigraphy and chronology inside the building units of a larger compound change?

2.2. How is the spacial layout of the ruin site in the last stage of construction?

### 1. Work in the cave systems

#### 1.1. The western A-System

We found out that the very eroded caves along the gully in the western A-System indeed are the remains of burial caves of the prehistoric Chokhopani-period. Inside the caves the dead were deposited in cylindrical pits - one above the other - and then covered with slaps of schist. Together with them some pottery vessels and ornaments as well as a few points made of schist were buried. The vessels are of Chokhopani-type but with a slightly developed shape and decoration (Fig. 3.1). Only in one grave-pit we found bracelets and bangles; all were made of iron (Fig. 3.2-4 after restoration).

As this section of the rock cliff is very much exposed to erosion many burials are eroded and thus no longer undisturbed. But we definitely found a prehistoric burial site which seems to be linked to the end of the period specified by the Chokhopani-

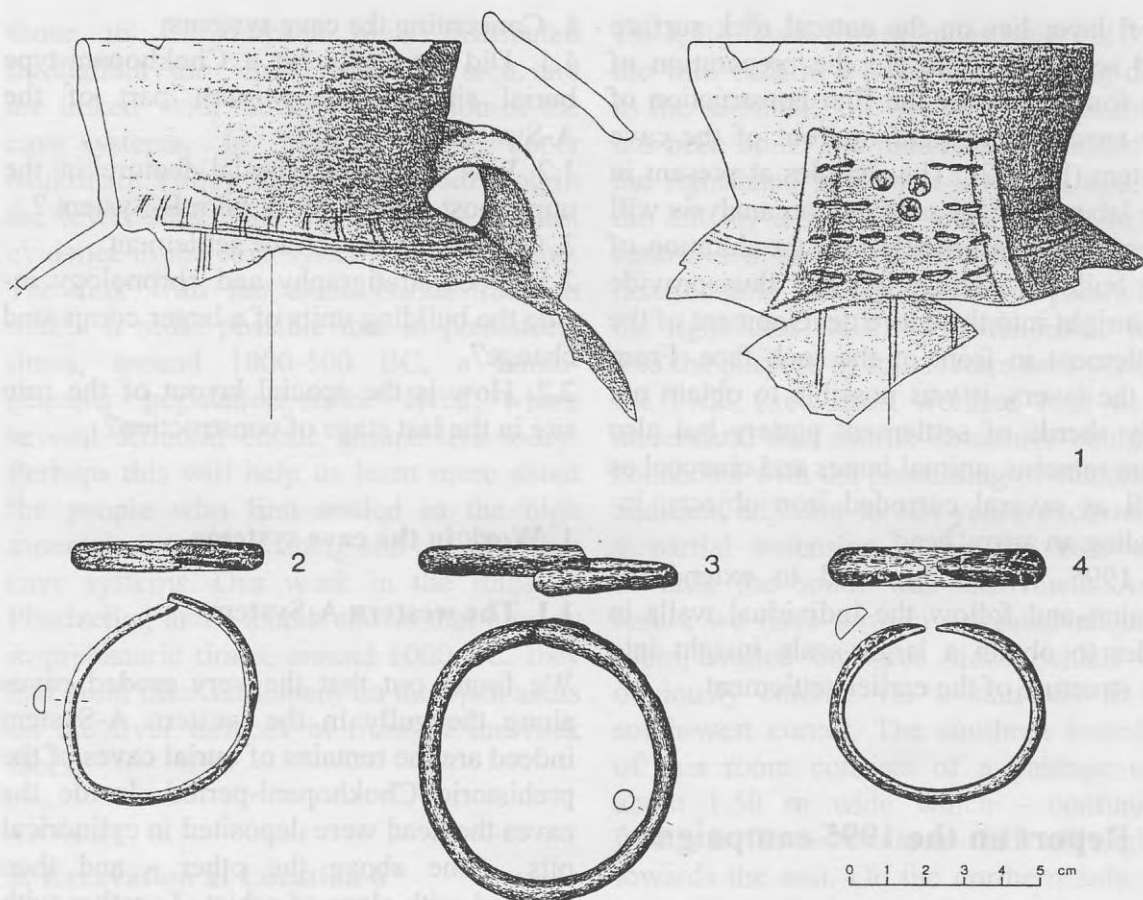


Fig. 3 Mebrak Western A-System (site 94.3), Location 2: Pottery and iron bangles from the burial cave.

ware which we named the "Chokhopani-Phase" of Mustang prehistory (about 1000-500 calBC).

### 1.2. The uppermost cave in the eastern B-System (Mebrak 63)

A very small cave entrance in the seventh storey of the easternmost section of the

B-System at Mebrak, towering some 30 m above the foot of the rock face, created great problems when the spelaeologists tried to provide access to it. Below it there were some eight meters of very brittle rock which meant that the approach was very dangerous. When we finally succeeded, we gained access to a very special feature: the small cave (5 m x 2 m) proved to be a prehistoric collective burial site. There were



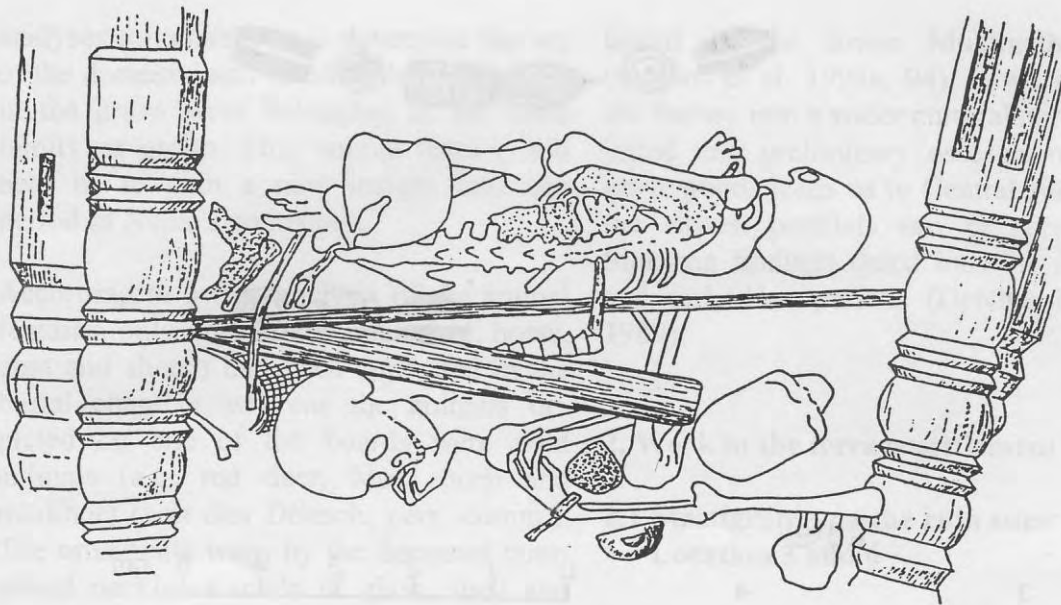


Fig. 4 Collective Burial Mebrak 63: Stratigraphy of the eastern bed coffin.

three bed-like wooden structures which were carved and partly painted (Plate 3 below, Plate 4). The boards were worked with an adze and elaborately fitted together. The bed coffins are now partly collapsed down and covered by a thick layer of bird-droppings and nesting materials. At first glance one could already see the remains of nine corpses which had been deposited over a period of time. Because of the dry climate the human remains were partly mummified, and leather and textile garments partly preserved. Pottery and wooden vessels could also be seen on the surface (Plate 3 above).

As excavation proceeded, this burial cave proved to be even more intriguing: We were able to recover the remains of at least

30 individuals who had been placed there over a period of about 350 years, according to the first results of the dendrochronological analysis of 30 wooden boards combined with radiocarbon dating. Obviously the deposited bodies were moved and placed aside as soon as a newly deceased person had to be buried. (This practice is known from many Megalithic sites in India and also in Europe.) Therefore most of the skeletons uncovered in the western section were dismembered and without heads while the skulls were deposited in one corner.

On and under one of the wooden bed-like structures were three layers of corpses - bound with cloth bands into a crouched position - deposited consecutively one

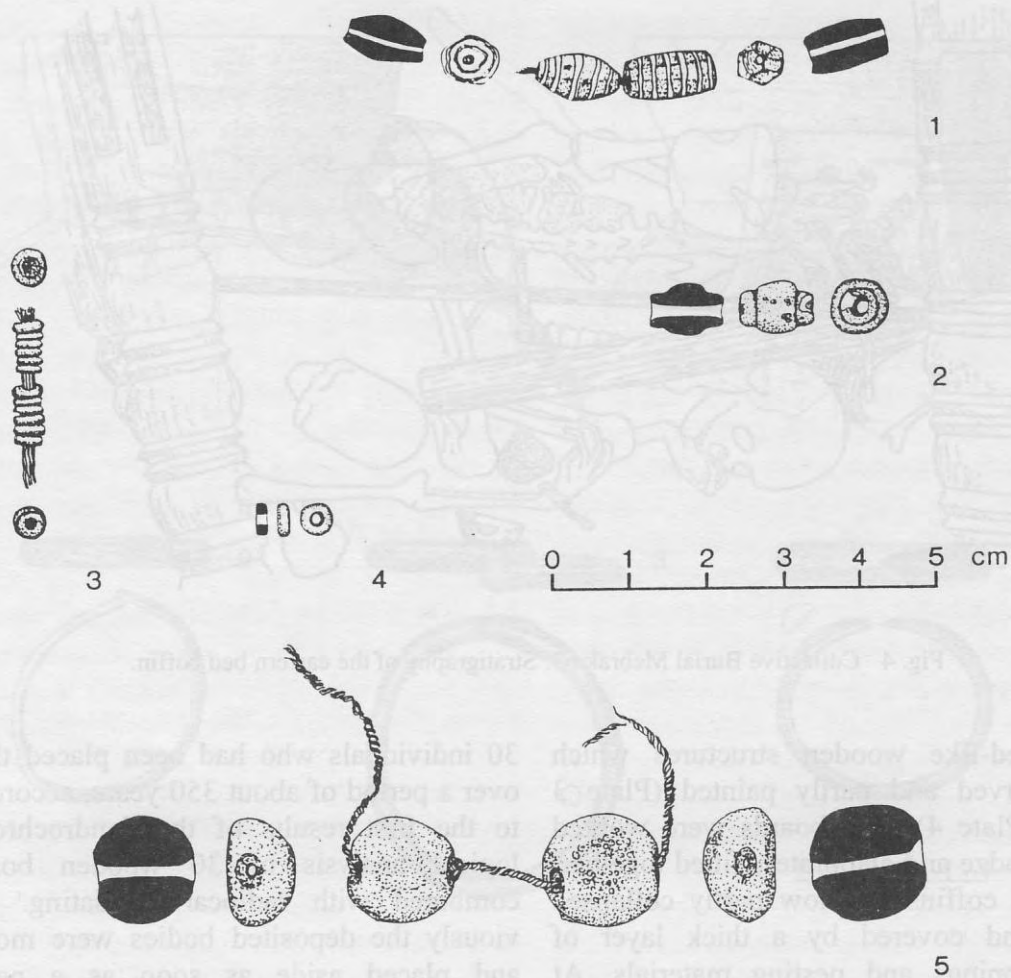


Fig. 5 Collective Burial Mebrak 63: Beads - carnelian (1), glass (2-3), shell (4), seeds (5).

above the other (Fig. 4). There is the unique chance to reconstruct the woolen and leather garment (Plate 6 above) which is being worked by a specialist in Germany. Most important are the anthropological analyses which may help solving the problem where the prehistoric inhabitants

of Mustang derived from. Scientists from four German universities work on the skeletal material. They try to find out, for example, which diseases the deceased persons were suffering from and which diet they were eating. (Thus one can partly reconstruct the former environment). Genetic

analyses can enable us to determine the sex of the deceased and whether the individuals in the grave were belonging to the same family or group. This unique feature will help us to gain a new insight into one period of Nepal's prehistory.

According to a first analysis of the animal remains, only domestic animals (e.g. horse, goat and sheep) had been deposited in the burial chamber whereas the animals depicted on one of the boards were wild animals (e.g. red deer, blue sheep and markhor) (von den Driesch, pers. comm.). The ornaments worn by the deceased comprised necklaces made of glass, shell and carnelian beads (Fig. 5) and some bronze bracelets. The dry climate had preserved a number of objects made of organic material such as baskets of varying shapes and pleached patterns (Plate 6 below), bamboo mugs, wooden bowls (Plate 5), a wooden bow, a bamboo flute etc.

It was, of course, most important to obtain an absolute dating of this burial cave. Now we received a number of radiocarbon dates from the laboratories of Cologne, Utrecht and Heidelberg. They come from bones, wood, basketware and seeds of the different layers of the grave. The dates range from around 350 calBC for the first burials to the first century calAD for the final depositions. Deriving from this special burial cave we named this period the "Mebrak Phase" of Mustang prehistory (about 400 calBC to 50calAD). In Mustang, we are already able to connect the grave to the 1992 findings in the terrace settlement of Phudzeling si-

tuated in the lower Muktinath Valley (Simons et al. 1994a, 94). If we try to set the feature into a wider cultural context, our initial and preliminary assessment of the grave goods leads us to Central Asia where the closest parallels can be seen in the Sinkiang findings dated into the Iron Age and early Han periods (Debaine-Francfort 1989).

## **2. Work in the terrace settlement**

### **2.1 Stratigraphy in the ruin sites Location 3 and 6**

In the ruin site in Location 6, we opened trenches adjoining to the east those we excavated last year. One of the questions for our research concerned the oldest layer in the ruin site which seems to have been a levelling stratum before any of the buildings were erected. This layer contained a grey prehistoric pottery ware belonging to the "Chokhopani-phase". We also found it overlying the natural rock surface in the new trenches so that it evidently was a preparation of the construction sites prior to the first building activities.

In the layers above we uncovered some wall systems which obviously constituted small habitation units each measuring about six square metres. The number of mud floors, however, differed in the two rooms excavated: the more western room contained only three layers while the eastern room had 6-8 occupational floors, one above the other.

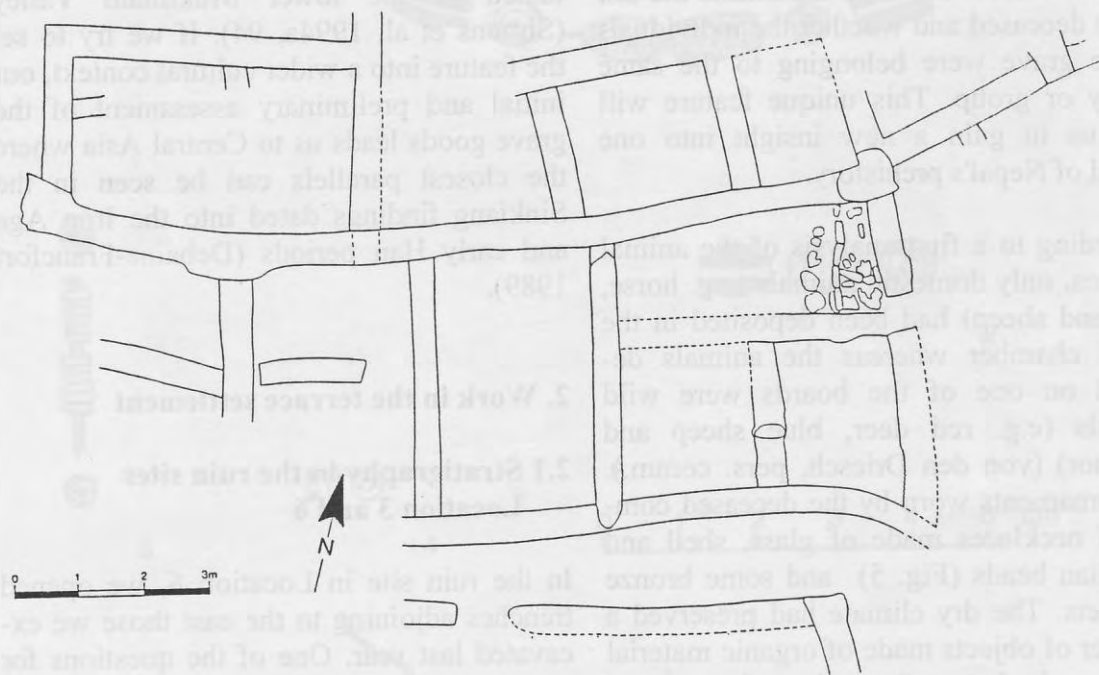


Fig. 6 Site plan of the excavated walls in ruin Location 6 in the terrace settlement.

In Location 3 situated to the northeast of Location 6 (towards the slope) we excavated a trench down to a depth of nearly 3 m following a wall built of big boulders which was constructed in order to retain the slope detritus eroded from above. We hope to connect the occupational layers of this trench to those of Location 6.

## 2.2 Spatial layout of the terrace settlement

In order to detect the spatial organization of the last stage of the settlement we followed the wall systems near the surface to the

north and east of Location 6. It seems that the pattern of small rooms and units continued across a wide area so that it is nearly impossible to determine definite boundaries between the single compounds. This does not seem astonishing as the nowadays pattern in the village-layout of Mustang is very similar.

A special feature was the burial of a headless juvenile whom we found deposited above the last occupational level of the house together with three metal bangles. It will be interesting to find out the meaning of this feature - maybe the anthropologists can help with the interpretation.



**Note**

\* We extend our sincere thanks to the Director and the staff of HMG Department of Archaeology for their valuable contribution during our joint excavation. We also would like to thank the inhabitants of the villages of Marpha, Dzong and Dzarkot in Mustang District for their kind cooperation. In the fieldwork of the 1994 and 1995 campaigns - apart from the two archaeologists of Cologne University (Angela Simons and Werner Schön) - our Nepalese counterpart of HMG Department of Archaeology (Sukra Sagar Shrestha) participated as well as a draftsman (Silke Haase), altogether six students (Martin Fischer, Thomas Kyll, Christian Nockemann, Svenja Schmitt, Angela Vielstich, Markus Westphal) and three spelaeologists (Daniel Gebauer, Uwe Scherzer and Christoph Harlacher) and local helpers. The then Director of HMG Department of Archaeology Mr. Kadgaman Shrestha as well as the lecturer of archaeology of Tribhuvan University Mr. Madan K. Rimal and the senior advisor Mr. Janak Lal Sharma visited our sites.

The authors hereby thank all the participants of the fieldwork for their skillful and dedicated help and suggestions.

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Plate 1 Remains of prehistoric burial caves in the West Face of Chokhopani.



Plate 2 Mebrak: Ruin Location 6, Trench 604. Northern wall. Below the boulders one can see the prehistoric level layer upon which the foundations of the first walls were constructed.



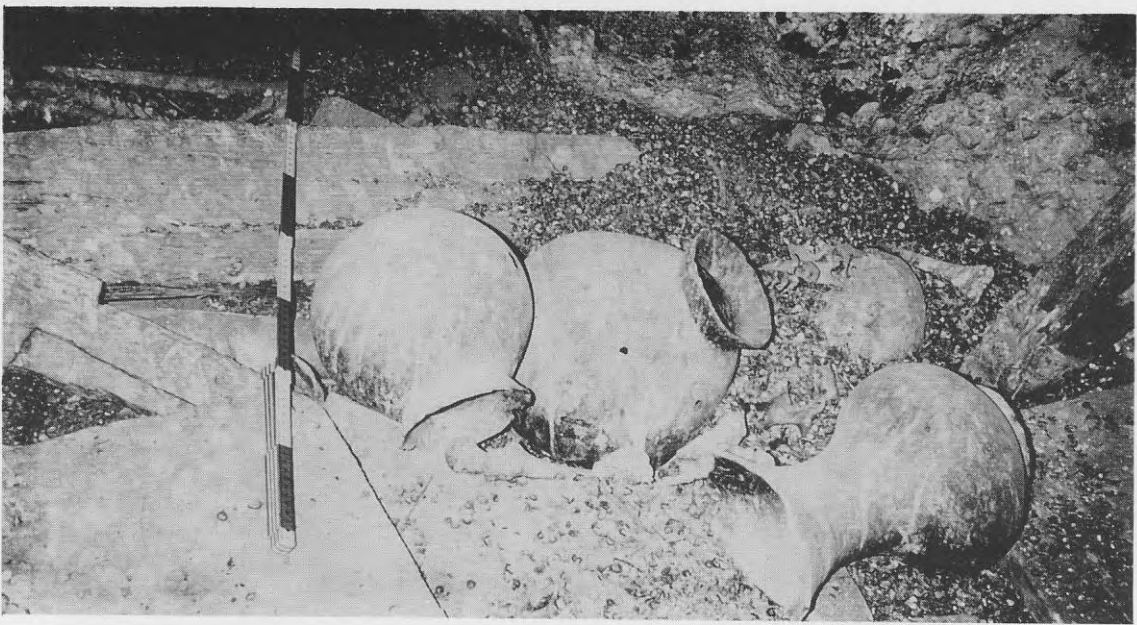


Plate 3

The collective grave  
Mebrak 63:  
above: Pottery vessels  
in the western part of  
the cave.  
below: One of the  
wooden bed coffins.





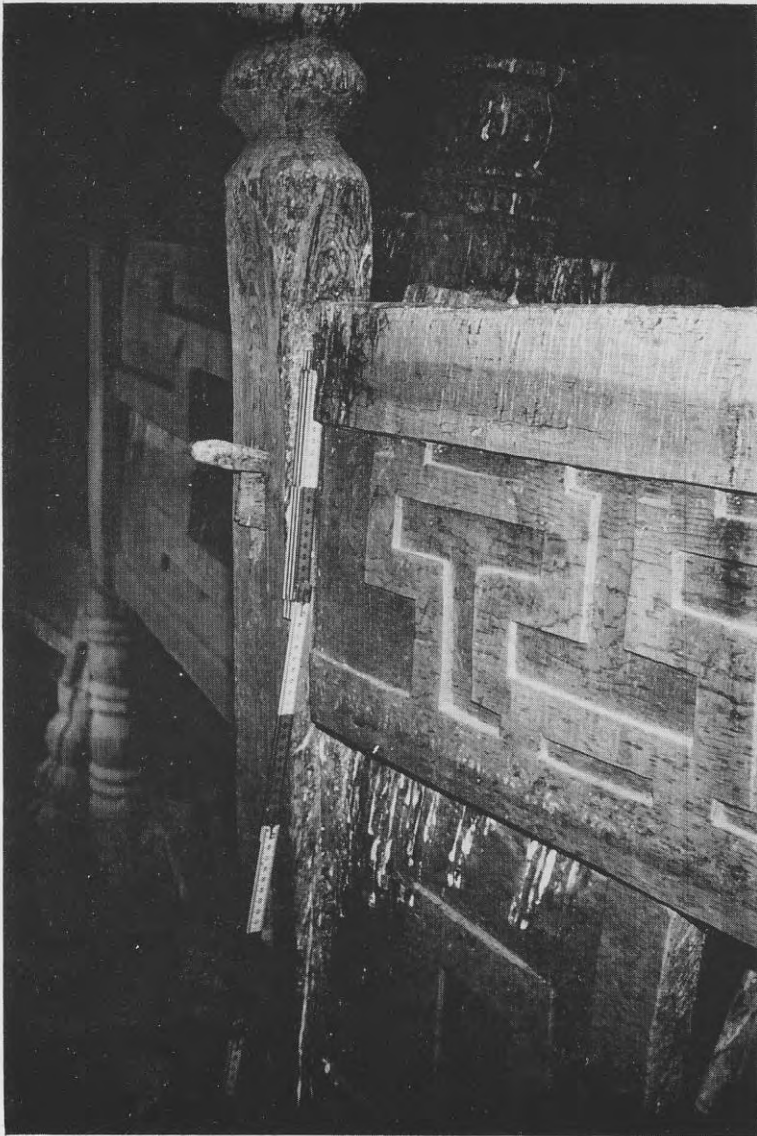


Plate 4: Grave Mebrak 63: Carved ornaments on the wooden bed coffins.



Plate 5 Finds in the collective grave Mebrak 63:  
above: gourd with incised ornaments; below: wooden vessel.

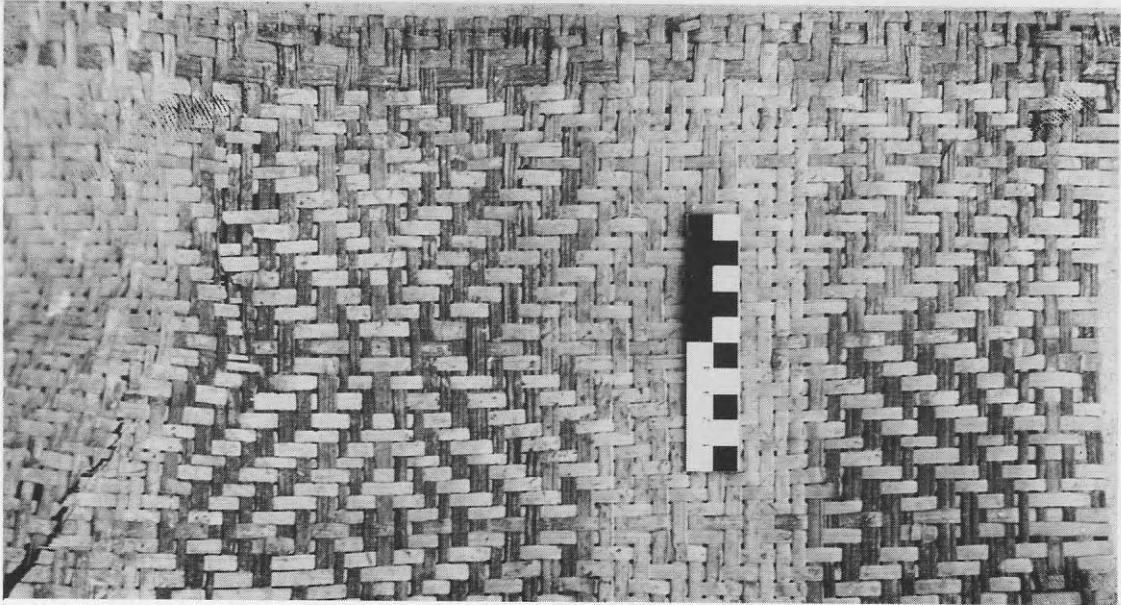


Plate 6 Finds in the collective grave Mebrak 63: above: leather boot; below: basket.