

## Archaeological Importance of Upper Mustang: The Mud Kingdom of Nepal

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### Abstract

Upper Mustang, the forbidden kingdom of Nepal has a virgin Tibetan culture, has more than 10,000 man-made caves and stupas, and various archaeological sites dating back up to 3,000 years. Unique paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, and three-millennia-old human remains have been found in these areas. The study shows that these caves were used for shelter and meditation. It has a unique history, culture, language, people, and landscape. Without knowing the Upper Mustang, we cannot know the historical reality of Nepal. This article discusses the people and culture, archaeological importance, Caves, and other historical places of upper Mustang based on fieldwork and secondary sources of data.

Keywords: Tiji, Archaeology, Cave, Monasteries and sacred

### Introduction

The Mustang is one of the Himalayan districts in northern Nepal. The Tibetan term for "Mustang" means "Plain of Aspiration." The Tibetan plateau, the largest peaks of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna, as well as several smaller peaks rising above 7,000 meters, encircle Mustang. Mustang's height increases from 1,372 to 8,167 meters as it stretches alongside the Kali Gandaki River. The northwest region of Nepal is where it is situated (Enterprise World, n.d.). Thak Sastsae, Panchgaon, Barago, and Lo Tsho Dyun are the four geographical divisions of Mustang and the Annapurna Conservation Area encompasses it. Thakali, Tamang, Tibetan Bhotia, and Lopa (Bista and Gurung) cultural groups reside in Mustang (Gurung, 2023).

Historically, it belongs to the lands of the ancient Lo Kingdom. Due to the high mountains, there are no trees or wood to construct buildings, houses, temples, etc., and used stone and clay to erect the buildings structures. From lowland areas, they bought wood for the construction of windows, doors, and exit galleries in palaces, houses, and temples. Buddhists make up the majority of Upper

Mustang's population. The main religious activities of the people in that area include building monasteries and continuously lighting lamps in monasteries; worshipping Guru Rinpoche Padma Sambhav, Shakyamuni, Gautam Buddha, and the Bodhisattva; believing in incarnate lamas; decorating religious shrines with statues, frescoes, and prayer flags; creating prayer wheels; playing musical instruments; and singing and dancing in Lhosar (Joshua Project, 2021). Hence, it is an exceptional region of Nepal as well as the world because of its geo-structure, caves made of mud, and the cultural heritage and traditions of the people.

### **Objective and Methods**

This article aims to thrash out the archaeological importance of the Caves and Monasteries of Upper Mustang. The specific objectives are to introduce the geographical location, people, and culture of Upper Mustang and to study the archaeological importance of the Caves, Monasteries, and other historical artifacts of Upper Mustang. Concerning the aforementioned objective, the descriptive method is to be applied to this article. The data used in the study is qualitative which was collected from field observation during October – November 2022. Some secondary sources include data from the Central Statistics Office, UNESCO, research articles, reports, blogs, dissertations, and other relevant research documents.

### **Cultural Learning and Tradition of Mustang**

The culture of Mustang is deep-rooted in the Buddhist religious belief and sentiments of locals as the region embellishments with several historical places like the Chortens, Mani walls, and Monasteries. Before Buddhism, the Bon religion was predominated in this region. The Ningmapa Sect (Dhakar-Kayu sub-sect) and Sakyapa Sect (Sakyapa, Ngorpa sub-sects) of Buddhism took place. The three-story Jhampa Gompa is a wonderful work of art that perfectly captures the rich architectural legacy of Lo-Manthang. Choedhe Gompa is currently Lo's primary Gompa. Choedhe Gompa is home to the Khempo and serves as a hub for religious activity. A monastic school that teaches new monks about the teachings of Buddha is located next to Choedhe Gompa. It is the sole Sakyapa monastic school in Upper Mustang. There are now about 90 monks enrolled in this school. An Amchi school in Lo is managed by the Amchi family (Tibetan) with some angel support. Out

of these learning institutions, it is itself an open museum and library that has preserved and transformed the knowledge of ancient people, religious leaders, and monks of Tibet and Mustang. Mustang has several feasts and festivals. Tiji also known as Tenchi is one of the most well-known festivals in that area. In Nepal's Upper Mustang region, specifically in Lo-Manthang, the Tiji Festival is arguably the most auspicious and has a long history back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the Tiji, there is another festival Vajrakila ceremony. Both of these festivals were observed to eliminate all negative influences and promote the welfare of Mustang. Currently, the Tiji festival is held during the third Tibetan month (May), but it was originally held near the end of the twelfth month of the Tibetan calendar. The Choedhe Monastery, which is a part of the Shakya branch of Buddhism, is responsible for organizing all of the Tiji festival dances. The dancing ritual is divided into three main phases. There are fifteen steps in the beginning section. The "formation of the heavenly palace" and the "era of Gods" are depicted in two stages in the second section (<https://www.annapurnafoothills.com>). There are actions to remove limitless perspectives to promote happiness. People generally think that by following these steps with faith, respect, and gratitude, the challenges of life will be removed. Out of these traditions, there are various belief systems, ritual practices, political and social systems that have been shaping the structure of the society of the Upper Mustang region.

### **People and History**

Despite being closely linked to the Tibetans physically and culturally, the Bhote communities who live in the Himalayan foothills—of which the Sherpas have garnered the most attention in the climbing community—have evolved regional differences among themselves. The word "Bhote" refers to a person who lives in the Tibetan part of Nepal, which is known by the Sanskrit term "Bhot." Yet, the name "Bhote" is often used generically to refer to members of the Mongoloid phenotype or those with Tibetan cultural ties. It might be ascribed to any non-Hindu of Mongoloid appearance and was typically used in a derogatory manner by the Pahari and the Newar (Savada, 1991). The southern Mustang people claim they are the true Thakalis. The Thakalis, or Gauchnan (elephant, red), Tulachans (dragon, blue/red), Juharchan (diamond), and Pannachan (emerald), are the sects that make up the Thakali tribe. These four clans are also known as the Gauchan, Tulachan, Sherchan, and Battachan. The Thakali customs are very different from those of other regions of

Nepal. One of the wealthiest ethnic groups in Nepal is the Thakalis. These people credit Kali Gandaki's centuries-long monopoly on the trade route for their financial success. Over the past 25 years, the Thak Khola region has made a substantial contribution to Nepal's tourism industry's growth (Nepal Army, 2005).

There are about 1200 Lobas in Lo Manthang, who inhabit about 200 mud dwellings. Still, there is a structure of mud city (wall of mud) which was constructed by King Ame Pal in 1380. From that period to now, people have been residing in the inner and outer parts of the mud wall and believe that it was protected by the god Buddha (Pyakurel and Bhatta, 2021). Nevertheless, they were shocked to see a social class hierarchy. As a result, the people that reside inside the walled city are the Kudak (Bista) and the Phalwa (Gurung). East of the city, the Lo Manthang River flows and near the town, it is home to Ghara (a blacksmith), Shemba (a butcher), and Emeta (a musician). The four-story white-washed palace called "Monkhar," which is situated in the center of the city, is home to the Raja (King) and Rani (Queen). Ame Pal, the first King of Mustang, is credited with building the palace in the early 14th century. Agriculture and domestic farming continue to be the main drivers of the economy. They have historically relied on trade, agriculture, and domesticating animals, but they now engage in tourism, which has altered the local population's economic situation (Annapurna Foothills, 2024).

Leonard (2016) claims that the initial occupants of Mustang migrated from the Tibetan plateau. This was discovered by the first ancient DNA study of the Himalayan Arc, which generated genomic data for eight individuals from the earliest known human settlements to the establishment of the Tibetan Empire. He presented the results of research done in 2017 in Nepal's Upper Mustang by Professor Mark Aldenderfer. Aldenderfer (2019) mentioned that, despite the combined obstacles of hypoxia, cold stress, and the relative lack of resources found there, the high elevations and high mountain valleys of Upper Mustang, were among the last areas on Earth to be populated by humans. In valley systems that are only a short distance apart, high mountains are thought to establish cultural, linguistic, and genetic isolates and to operate as barriers to population migration and gene flow. In another article, Aldenderfer (2021), added that the scientific research conducted in Upper Mustang examined the effects of high-elevation environments on human mobility and people's ideas, beliefs, and material culture. Through excavating several sites from near Jomsong to close to the Tibetan border in a little village named Samdzong, the research findings have

stretched the history of Mustang back to 3,000 years ago. The research team has been studying the deep history of the Himalayan Arc for the past ten years (Pokhrel, 2017). It shows the vast history of the people living in Upper Mustang as well as the civilizations that once called the area home.

### **Major Archaeological Sites of Upper Mustang**

Upper Mustang has been regarded as the very ancient human settlement in the region. It has various archaeological places that should be studied and researched for new information on human evolution and the cultural development of Tibet origin people. Aldenderfer (2021) further suggested that ancient residents of the Upper Mustang region might have embraced burial customs similar to those of Zoroastrians while journeying in the Western regions. These rituals could have evolved into, or influenced, the Tibetan sky burial ceremony. In the 1980s, a team from Nepal and Germany found ancient cave tombs that were approximately 3,000 years old. The human bodies in those caves had not been stripped of flesh. In 2009, the group that made the discovery revealed they had come across a collection of Tibetan art, manuscripts, and skeletons from the 15th century in a cliff cave in the upper Mustang region (Than, 2011). Devkota and John Vincent Bellezza worked together to study the archaeological and cultural sites of Upper Mustang. They co-authored a paper titled 'Obscured for Centuries: The Lost Rock Art of Lo Mustang' to document their discovery. Since carbon dating was not conducted, Belleza examined the rock art and inscriptions, using Devkota's photos, to compare them with the rock art in western Tibet, Sipti, and Ladakh. He believes that some of the paintings were created before the 7th century CE (Ancient Pages, 2017). In the paper, Devkota further states that while the early paintings are prehistoric, the later ones show influence from Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon religious practices. The rock art shows hunting and interactions between wild animals and humans, births, human-like portraits, tiered shrines, and sacred symbols. Similarly, Belleza states that the rock art in Kya and Ludak depicts the beliefs, values, and activities of the painters, making it challenging to identify their particular traditions. Determining if the artists were pastoralists, agriculturists, or both is also a challenging task (Shrestha, 2017).

The Kapilvastu Museum showcases various items found at Chokhopani burial sites such as carnelian beads, shells, faience, copper bangles, anthropomorphic figures, stone needles, channeled spouted bowls, cord-decorated pottery, and storage jars. A child mummy from the 4th

century BC, found in a cave in Mebrak of Mustang is currently housed in the National Archives and will soon be exhibited at the National Museum (Darnal, 2017). It indicates that the cave was utilized for around 400 years, starting from roughly 400 BC and ending in 50 AD (Kurt et.al, 2003). Major archaeological sites of upper Mustang are given in the following table:

**Table no.1: Major Archaeological Sites of Upper Mustang**

S.N.	Archaeological sites	Features
1	Lo Manthangh	The highest point of Upper Mustang trail and the capital of former kingdom of Lo.
2	Chhoser	Some ancient monasteries and caves include 9 stair caves with 45 rooms inside.
3	Korala (Nepal-Tibet border)	The best place to see the Tibetan highland, an eye-catching place of upper Mustang.
4	Luri Gumpa and Ghar Gumba	An ancient religious and historical monastery of Ghara and Yara. Ghar Gumba was constructed in the 8th century by Guru Padmasambhava, a Tibetan Magician, and is associated with the Nyingma branch of Buddhism ( <a href="http://www.globaladventuretrekking.com">www.globaladventuretrekking.com</a> ).
5	Damodar Kunda	Damodar Kunda Lake, the main source of fossil stones, origin of the Kaligandaki River.
6	Old style villages	Traditional villages like Kagbeni, Chhusang, Ghiling, Ghami, Dhakmar, and Tsarang are untouched by the modernity.
7	Ancient Chortens	The longest Mani Wall, the red cliff of Dhakmar, and virgin Tibetan culture.
8	<b>Monasteries</b>	Jhyampa Monastery, Thubchen Monastery, Choedye monastery, Charang Monastery, etc

Source: Field Study, 2022 and <http://www.uppermustangtour.com>

### Archaeological Evidence: Sacred Monasteries and Mystical Caves

Most of the monasteries of Upper Mustang are in traditional form and have not been affected by modernization and modern lifestyle. Most of the monasteries of Upper Mustang were established in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and constructed in the finest models of classical Tibetan monastic architecture. Major monasteries of Upper Mustang are given in the following table:

**Table No.2: Main Monasteries of Upper Mustang**

S.N.	Name of the Monasteries	Location and date of establishment
1	Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery	Kagbeni ; established in the 15th century
2	Terri Samdrub Chodhing Monastery	Tirigaon
3	Chele Monastery	Chhusang villge
4	Samar Monastery	Samar village
5	Chungsi Cave Monastery	Syangboche
6	Thrangu Tashi Choling Monastery	Ghiling ; established in the 14-15 century
7	Ghami Shedrub Dhargey Ling Monastery	Lo Ghami; established in the 14th century
8	Tsarang Monastery	Established in the 13th century
9	Ghar Gumba monastery	Lo Gekar; established in the 8th century and oldest monastery in the region.
10	Thubchen Gompa	Lo-Manthang; established in the late 15th century
11	Jampa Lhakang Monastery	Inside Mud Walled City; established in the early 14th century
12	Chode Gompa	Lo-Manthang
13	Garghu Dhejing Chhyoling Gompa	Chhoser ; established in the 15th century

14	Nyiphuk Namdol Norbuling Gompa	Choser ; established in the 14th century
15	Chhujung Gompa	Dhigaon
16	Samduling Gompa	Lo-Manthang
17	Namgyal Monastery	Lo Manthang; established in the 10th century
18	Luri Ghang Gompa	Ghara village; established between the 13 <sup>th</sup> to 14th century

Source: Field Study, 2022 and <https://www.mustangtreknepal.com/>

Mustang is also regarded as the Land of Caves, with 10,000 human-made caves dug in the Mustang district. The caves near Lo Manthang hold a rich tribal history connected to the indigenous population. Different caves served various functions in ancient times, such as providing shelter for refugees and storing valuables. For example, caves like Luri and Tashi Kabum contain stupas. There are also numerous burial caves scattered throughout various regions of Upper Mustang. The Chokhopani funeral caves housed pottery, bones, beads, and copper jewelry, while Bon practices are also evident in the caves of Upper Mustang (Sherpa, 2024).

Archaeologists and researchers discovered partially mummified human bodies and skeletons ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 years old. Buddhist paintings, manuscripts, sculptures, and various artifacts were found dating back to the 12th to the 14th century. In 2007, a shepherd revealed 55 cave paintings that illustrated the life of Buddha. The caves are so fascinating in both design and location that they can amaze anyone (Aasra, 2019). Therefore, these locations in Nepal hold great archaeological and historical significance. Some of the archaeologically important caves of this region are listed below:

**Table no.3: Major Caves of Upper Mustang**

S.N.	Major Caves	Location	Key Features
1	Jhong cave	Chhoser	With 5 stories high and built into a cliff, with more than 40 different rooms, and many ladders to go from one floor to another inside the cave.



2	Shija Jhong cave	Chhoser	Situated close to the border of China (Tibet), having 40 rooms inside the cave. People of Chhoser and adjacent villages stayed together inside the cave in war and threat of outsiders. ( <a href="https://www.mustangtreknepal.com">https://www.mustangtreknepal.com</a> ).
3	Mandala Cave	Choser,	Two storeys and 16 Mandalas on their ceiling.
4	Phodaling Cave	GoijeTha village, Choser	Having 70 paintings with a panel of 56 settled in three rows.
5	Chukumau Dhakpu Cave	Chu Kumārapo village, Choser	Three-stories cave, a manuscript written in gold letter.
6	Marchung Cave	Samjung River	Four storeys and has a Tibetan manuscript.
7	Luri Cave	Ghara village	Five chörtens and four storeys
8	Tangya kabung cave	Tangya village	Has group of chörten
9	Charang Cave	Charang	Has 33 chambers inside the cave.
10	Dhakmar Cave	Ghami	Has the colour of red blood
11	Ghami caves	Ghami	Has eight-storey caves and many chambers
12	Tama Gaon cave	Ghiling	Has many levels and inscriptions
13	Chungsi Cave	between Summer and Syangboche villages	Has old monuments and sky caves

Source: Darnal, 2017; Nepal Spirit, 2022 and Field Study, 2022.

In 1990, a collaboration between the University of Cologne and Nepali archaeologists led to the discovery of numerous dozen dead bodies, all dating back at least 2,000 years, within the sky caves. Since that period, various research teams have continued to examine the isolated Upper Mustang location, yet no one has strongminded who constructed the caves. The sky caves of Mustang also house important Buddhist artworks, including paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, and a variety of artifacts from the 12th to 14th centuries. Because of the uniqueness of the architecture of the cave, the sky caves of Mustang have been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage tentative site since 1996 and the Mud-walled city of Upper Mustang was listed in 2008 (<https://omgnepal.com>). This information indicates that the Upper Mustang region is rich in archaeological facts and cultural traditions.

### **The Archaeological Importance of the Caves and Monasteries**

The upper Mustang was a forbidden land up to 1992 and nobody could enter without the permission of the government. However, the government authorities have permitted a few researchers to enter the region even though Mustang was closed. The Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci and Toni Hagen visited Mustang in 1952 for research work and a survey of that region including the kingdom of Nepal. Similarly, Professor David Snellgrove visited the area and studied the temples and monasteries in 1956, 1960–61, and 1978 (Gurung, 2023). In the fall of 1963, Babara Adams, who had lived in Nepal for a long time, came to Mustang. The greatest overview of Mustang can be found in the book “Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom” composed by Michel Peissel, who stayed several months in Upper Mustang in 1964. Similarly, Dr. Harka Gurung also traveled to Upper Mustang in 1973 and wrote about the region (<https://www.alpineholidaysnepal.com>).

Recent DNA studies have provided insights into the enigma surrounding the original cave builders. According to Heritagedaily (2020), the original occupants of the Mustang Region were East Asians from the Tibetan plateau, and their genetic makeup was very similar to that of the current Sherpa and Tibetan communities. The caves' habitation has been identified, with the earliest being around 1000 BC, when they were used for human interment. There is evidence relating to the Buddhist practice of sky burials from the third to the seventh centuries AD.

In addition to local disputes, the area experienced instability around the eleventh century AD. As a result, some buildings were excavated into the crag face aimed at safeguarding, and several of

the entombment caves were converted into living spaces. Archaeologists discovered numerous Buddhist canvases, monuments, artifacts, and manuscripts with literatures from both Buddhism and the Bon faith, indicating that the caverns had been utilized as meditation chambers by the 12th to 15th century AD. They discovered a 25-foot-wide mural with 55 panels that tell the life narrative of the Buddha. Each panel is between 14 and 17 inches in size. This tradition and culture date back at least to the 12th century. Archaeologists, art specialists, and climbers from Nepal, Italy, and the United States made up the team. A local sheep herder gave them a tip, stating that he had sheltered from the rain a few years prior and had spotted a cave with historic murals (Gurubacharya, 2007). Similarly, the interior of Mustang Caves was also investigated in 1990 by a group of Nepalese archaeologists and investigators from the University of Cologne. About 2,000 years ago, they discovered the remains of a dozen human bones. In the caves, which served as burial chambers in 1000 BC, they discovered prehistoric murals. They also discovered items from the home, such as containers and utensils, and they thought that the locals utilized these caverns as a place to hide during and after wars. Chungsi Cave, Nyiphuk Cave, and the Luri Gompa are among the caverns that are thought to have subsequently been converted into monasteries. There is a fantastic chance to learn about cave culture and ancient sky burial (mybestplace, 2015). Some of the importance of the historical Caves and Gumbas of Upper Mustang can be concluded in the following points:

1. Significant to study Buddhist culture and uninjured Tibetan culture and tradition
2. Provide historical glimpses of the region.
3. Sacred places for meditations because of the strong aura and rhythmic chants of the monks.
4. Golden manuscripts and artifacts provide the actual history of the region.
5. Open book to study the relationship between nature and cultural adaptations.
6. Breathtaking landscapes and structures of caves provide the lifestyle of the ancient people.
7. Archaeological importance to find out the actual history of Nepal, Tibet, and their linkage.
8. Provide the information to study the relationship between intangible culture and tangible structure.
9. Mysterious of more than 10,000 ancient caves, their structure, and artifacts inside the caves.
10. Archaeological importance of burial chambers, dead bodies, copper jewelry, and glass beads.

## Conclusion

The upper Mustang of Nepal is a unique, self-dependent, culturally rich, and geographically exceptional area of Nepal as well as the world. Because of the structures of caves and monasteries, it provides new insights into culture-environment relations. Various archaeological artifacts, manuscripts, intangible and tangible cultural heritages, and human settlements provide the actual history of Nepal, Tibet, and the entire region. There are more than 10,000 caves, a lot of monasteries, and the living culture which is the open library to study the culture, people, and ecology of the high Himalayan region. The existence of famous places, settlement areas, historical places, etc. are very significant for archaeological research, the study of Tibetan untouched culture, and pilgrim for Hindu and Buddhist people of Nepal and the world. Because of the exceptionality of caves and monasteries, the Government of Nepal should prepare the proper conservation plan and should allocate the budget for the detailed study of the archaeology, cultural heritage, and the people of that region.

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