Simons, A. (ed.) (2019). Hirten im Himalaya – Prähistorische Mumien im Höhlengrab Mebrak 63 (Mustang/Nepal). (Archäologische Berichte, 31). Kerpen Loogh: DGUF Verlag. – 481 pages. ISBN 978-3-945633-18-9. Open Access edition: https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.596

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Mustang is one of seventy-five districts of Nepal, and the second most sparsely populated in the country. Until the eighteenth century it had been an autonomous kingdom, a vassal of a more powerful principality to the west, named Jumla, and one of more than sixty such petty states that were conquered by the armies of Gorkha and unified into a single nation. The kingdom of Mustang had been founded in the fourteenth century, and although most historical accounts attribute the foundation to a certain Amepal, a minister of a neighbouring Tibetan state called Gungthang, recent research suggests that the credit for this should go rather to his father and grandfather (Vitali, 2012). Before the foundation of the kingdom, the northernmost areas were under the control of various powerful families, while the southern part seems to have consisted of a loose association of democratic states, some of them little bigger than large villages. Going even further back in time, we know that, before the region became a part of the Tibetan empire in the seventh century, it had been a part of the mysterious land of Zhangzhung, about which very little is known other than that it may have been a confederation of kingdoms, with one or more political centers in the western part of the Tibetan Plateau and the Sutlej Valley. For the period preceding the rise of the Tibetan empire there are no written sources – the Tibetan script was created only in the seventh century – and until recently, the history of Mustang prior to this time was completely unknown. This state of affairs began to change in 1992 with the inception of the Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology (NGPHMA), a multidisciplinary DFG-funded program of research in Mustang district, headed by Dieter Schuh and scheduled to run for six years. The group of researchers, which included several teams of archaeologists, published their work-in-progress in a number of journals including *Ancient Nepal*, the journal of the Archaeology Department of Nepal, in association with which the project was being conducted. All the relevant publications were subsequently republished as a compilation (Shrestha et al., 1999).

The team of archaeologists led by Angela Simons concentrated on three sites: Chokopani, the southernmost location, a burial site close to the Kali Gandaki River that runs the length of Mustang and on southwards; Phudzeling, a long-abandoned settlement in the lower part of the Dzong Chu, an eastern tributary of the Kali Gandaki, and Mebrak, a south-facing cave complex in a cliff face further up this same tributary. It is this set of caves, and especially the cave designated Mebrak 63 by the team, that forms the subject of the volume under review.

The cave systems that are to be seen in the cliffs along the entire length of the Upper Kali Gandaki and its side valleys are the most conspicuous part of the region's archaeological heritage. The Italian orientalist Giuseppe Tucci, who travelled in Mustang in 1953, was baffled by them. There were too many of them to have been monasteries, he concluded, and a local explanation that the caves had been excavated as hide-outs during the China-Nepal war of the eighteenth century was unconvincing: "Wars break out suddenly and do not allow time for preparing large numbers of rock shelters such as these" (Tucci, 1982, 55). He did, however, offer the tentative hypothesis that the caves may have been habitations, since "Even the capital of Guge in Western Tibet was a town of caves and caverns" (ibid., 55).

As Angela Simons remarks, it is surprising that there seem to be no local accounts – other than the implausible suggestion recorded by Tucci – concerning the origin of the caves, since they seem to be precisely the sort of mysterious phenomena around which a rich cluster of folktales might develop. On the other hand, it is also true that, for observers other than historically curious Westerners, the caves are a relatively unremarkable feature of an extraordinarily dramatic landscape in which a great many topographical features are the subject of myths: for example, a certain oddly-shaped hill is regarded as the saddle of the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava, and another as his hat; the red and blue colouring of two adjacent groups of hills are attributed respectively to the blood and to the liver of a demoness who was dismembered by the same saint, and so on. The only written account of the excavation of a tunnel of which the present reviewer is aware is a document from the village of Tangbe, to the north of Mebrak, recording the engagement of a team of miners from a nearby district in the early twentieth century to dig an underground irrigation canal. There are occasional references to the use of cave systems as anchoritages, as in the ref-

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erences to an eleventh-century lama, Rong Tokme Zhikpo, who lived in one such labyrinthine complex in northeast Mustang and was accordingly referred to as the one "who sees neither the sun by day nor the moon by night". And even if the caves may not have been created as refuges, they were certainly used as such long after they had ceased to be the main dwelling places of the local inhabitants. During the wars between Mustang and Jumla in the seventeenth century, for example, the inhabitants of the village of Te, in a valley to the north of the Dzong Chu, abandoned their houses, preferring to starve "in the cliff caves of the birds" to the likely alternative of being slaughtered by invading forces (Ramble, 2008, 83).

Other than the uses of these caves proposed by Tucci, as secular habitations, religious cloisters and refuges in times of war, there was one function that he had no reason to suspect: that some of these caves were used as tombs for the dead. In the fourth year of the NGPHMA, upon entering a small cave situated some thirty meters above the foot of the cliff, the team made what was to be the single most significant discovery of the project: a collective grave containing the remains of up to thirty individuals of varying ages. It is the description and analysis of these remains and the grave goods that had been deposited in the cave that form the subject of the present book.

At 480 pages, comprising nine main chapters, an extensive English summary, and over a hundred pages of tables and documentation, this book is without doubt the most substantial and important contribution to date on the archaeology of prehistoric societies in the High Himalaya. The first four chapters are authored by Angela Simons, the editor of the book as a whole. Chapter 1 provides the background to the project, a description of the site and the circumstances leading up to the discovery of Mebrak 63. It also offers an answer to the question that has surely been in the minds of many who were aware of the work of the NGPHMA: why there should have been a lapse of 23 years between the end of the project and the publication of this volume. There are, in fact, a number of good reasons for this. One of the most important was the timing of the discovery, which was made just two years before the end of the project, meaning that the members had insufficient time to process the material before they had to meet the demands of their subsequent professional commitments: the funding for a follow-on project dedicated to working on the finds did not materialize. Much of the material was kept in Nepal, and the work that the team members were able to do in the course of sporadic visits was severely compromised by the deteriorating political situation and, ultimately, the outbreak of civil war in the country. Finally, when things returned to normal and the researchers were again able to visit the national museum in Kathmandu and the other locations where the finds had been stored, they discovered that many of the items had been displaced or simply lost. In these circumstances a delay with the publication is entirely understandable, and we should rather congratulate the editor and her colleagues on completing the book at all.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the finds according to eight excavation plana. Many of the details presented here resonate with what is known about pre-Buddhist Tibetan funerary practices from both textual sources and other excavations. One of these is the presence of red ochre on the bodies, a feature noted by Aldenderfer and Eng (2016) in their documentation of grave sites in nearby areas. The use of ochre is reminiscent of the cinnabar that was prescribed in the treatment of the bodies of the Tibetan emperors. According to a text containing what Tibetans regard as the original set of instructions for royal funerals, following the death of the ruler "the top-knot of the hair should be bound like a braid…, the surface [of the body] should be anointed with vermilion, the body should be lacerated and scratched…" (Haarh, 1969, 344). Eric Haarh, the translator of this passage, suggests that "the use of vermilion in the preparation of the corpse probably derives either from an original use of blood, or it serves as a substitute for blood … Moreover, a certain embalming effect may have been obtained by the use of vermilion" (ibid., 344). Just one other feature that may be mentioned here in relation to funerary rites is the presence of the remains of various animals, notably goats, sheep and horses. While it is entirely possible, as Simons suggests, that parts of the sheep and goats may have been intended as meat offerings, and that the horses may have been of special importance for the deceased during their lifetimes, it is worth mentioning the significance of certain animals, notably sheep and horses, in pre-Buddhist beliefs about the afterlife. A number of early Tibetan ritual texts from Dunhuang refer to the psychopompic role of sheep and horses as guides for the souls of the dead (see for example Stein, 1971). A final remark that may be made about the items in the cave is the presence of goods that can only have been acquired through long-distance trade, such as beads and glass objects, suggesting that the Dzong Chu valley was part of a commercial

network extending through Central, South and Southeast Asia.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed study of the morphology, rich decoration and the construction of the "bed coffins" and other wooden artefacts in the cave, while chapter 4 reconstructs the history of the use of the cave on the basis of stratigraphic data, ^{14}C and dendrochronological dating, as well as constructional and stylistic evidence. Mebrak 63 was used as a collective tomb for almost five centuries from roughly 450 BCE to the turn of the millennium, with older corpses being displaced to make way for new ones, and most of the activity taking place in the two centuries from about 400 to 200 BCE.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the team of anthropologists who worked on the human remains. Divided into eight sections, the chapter is the collective work of five contributors: Kurt W. Alt, Birgit Grosskopf, Nicole Nicklisch, Werner Vach and Gisela Grupe. The sections deal with:

1. research on mummies in general and the mummified remains in Mebrak 63 in particular (Alt);
2. taphonomy (Alt);
3. sex and age determination (Nicklisch, Grosskopf and Alt);
4. palaeodemography (Nicklisch, Grosskopf and Alt);
5. osteometry (Nicklisch and Alt);
6. palaeopathology and palaeoepidemiology (Alt and Nicklisch);
7. morphological relationships (Alt, Nicklisch and Vach), and
8. microstructural and material preservation, and nutritional reconstruction using stable isotopes from bone collagen (Grupe).

The first four sections of chapter 6, authored by Susan Möller-Wiering, deal with the textiles as well as the fur and leather samples found in the cave. Somewhat surprisingly, the main textile here is cotton (sometimes in combination with a flax-like bast), again pointing to trade connections with lowland areas – perhaps the Gangetic plains or Central Asia? – since the plant was never cultivated in this area. Cotton may be from India, but the techniques used – including a remarkably wide range of weaves – situate the people of Mebrak closer to Inner Asia in terms of their material culture. The chapter is concluded with a short section by Christian-Herbert Fischer on the analysis of dyes and the reconstruction of colours from the textiles taken from the cave.

Chapter 7 has two main parts, devoted respectively to the plant and animal remains in the cave. The first part, divided into four sections, comprises contributions by Jutta Meurers-Balke, Karl-Heinz Knörzer, Arie J. Kalis, Angela Simons and Tanja Zerl, while in the second part Angela von den Driesch presents the analysis of the animal remains. The two main crops in the Dzong Chu valley at the present time, barley and sweet buckwheat, would not be cultivated for nine centuries after the last burial, and the grains and pulses found in the cave either grew wild or were imported from the south. Imports, which included rice and peas, are likely to have been luxury foodstuffs – as indeed rice was until only a few decades ago – deposited as prestigious offerings for the dead. Readers familiar with Nepal may be surprised to learn that millet, which is associated with the relatively low-lying middle hills, may have been a staple food that was not cultivated but gathered in the wild, and also that it seems to have been the main ingredient in a beer that was drunk from bamboo vessels through bamboo straws – exactly as is now the case in the eastern Himalayas. Many clues, among them the analysis of the seeds and the animal remains, make it probable that the people in question were a community of pastoralists who entombed their dead in the burial chamber.

Chapter 8 focuses on the dating and chronology of the burials. The first section, by Burghart Schmidt and Wolfgang Gruhle, presents the results of dendrochronological research carried out on the wooden objects in the cave. While the existing dendrochronological record from the area was patchy, to say the least, comparisons made with the Western European tree ring calendar, which suggest similarities in climatic patterns between the two regions, enabled the researchers not only to expand the range of the calendar for the Himalayan region, but also to establish a plausible date of 307 BCE for the felling of the tree from which one of the coffin boards was made. This coincides very satisfyingly with the ^{14}C date of 302 ±30 obtained for the sample of the last tree rings of the same board. In the second section, Jutta Meurers-Balke and Angela Simons bring the dendrochonologicial findings into line with the many radiocarbon dates taken from wooden objects and also from the human bones in the cave. In combination with the felling dates of the trees from which posts and boards of the coffins were made, this leads to the assumption that a body was entombed in the burial chamber approximately every 15 to 20 years.

Chapter 9, a synthetic summary and discussion of the work as a whole, is followed by an ex

tended English-language version (chapter 10) of this overview.

The entire volume is written and organized with admirable clarity; its interdisciplinary character, and the fact that each of the chapters situates its analyses in a geographical context that encompasses adjacent and much more distant regions, ensure that it will be of value to researchers whose interests lie well beyond Mustang, and even the Himalayas. Archaeologists are used to working in difficult situations, but the research site of Mebrak 63 was exceptionally challenging by any standards, and it would be appropriate to conclude the review of this remarkable study with an appreciation of the determination of Angela Simons and the team who discovered Mebrak 63. Over the course of several lengthy campaigns they lived in a village on the opposite side of a gorge to the community on whose territory the caves were located, while the two villages were locked in a bitter territorial dispute. Dangling from a rope high up a crumbling cliff face is unpleasant enough for any non-climber, but when this is compounded by having to shift two thousand years' worth of accumulated bird excrement under which the site was buried, not to mention fending off sporadic attacks by a pair of aggressive choughs that were nesting below the cave, all the while coping with the ferocious dust-laden wind that blasts along the Kali Gandaki every day from morning to evening, the team deserve our admiration and congratulations, and this volume is a fitting tribute to their dedication.

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