

## **Proposal for a new SLSA project in the Kingdom of Bhutan**

Mission-Report by Dr. Eberhard Fischer

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My short trip to Bhutan (November 9–17, 2006) was aimed at clarifying whether archaeological research could be carried out and how Archaeology could become institutionalised within this Kingdom in Eastern Himalaya. I had already visited Bhutan once before in 1996, together with the former Swiss ambassador Jean-Pierre Zehnder. This time, I was requested by the resident coordinator of Helvetas, Werner Külling, to interrupt my trip to India in order to follow his invitation to clarify the possibilities of assigning Swiss experts to a first archaeological excavation in Bhutan – a matter which goes back to the initiative of H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, the Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs, Bhutan. The main goal was to verify how suitable a site selected by the Bhutan Department of Culture (headed by Ms. Dorji Yangki) might be for an excavation cum training course led by a Swiss archaeologist: the castle ruins **Drapham dzong** in the upper Choekhor valley of the Bumthang region. I was also asked to contact members of the Cultural authority of Bhutan, in order to personally hear their opinions about archaeology in Bhutan.

During this undertaking, I made it an important concern to visit also the excavation sites at **Batpalathang**, where the now Freiburg-based archaeologist and former secretary of the SLSA, Reto Blumer, carried out an emergency excavation on behalf of the SLSA in 1999 and 2000. This excavation site lies immediately next to the entrance of the building complex of the Renewable Natural Resource Center (RNR-RC) Jakar, Bumthang, built by Helvetas in Central Bhutan. In the best travel guide for Bhutan (Pommaret, 2006: page 183), this place of discovery is described as «the first archaeological excavation in Bhutan». In addition, I wanted to view the ruins of **Yuwashing dzong** from up close. In 2001, Reto Blumer had designated these ruins as a major archaeological initial project.

### **Account of the Journey**

On November 9, I flew from Zurich via Dubai and Delhi to Paro, where I was met by Helvetas employees who then accompanied me to Thimphu. There, I was briefed by the Helvetas Coordinator E. Werner Külling. The following day, Mr. Namgyel Tshering, Head of Administration, Helvetas, drove me by car to Bumthang in Central Bhutan (9 hours). I would like to thank my Bhutanese escort for his dedicated guidance and all the information he imparted relating to regional studies. In Jakar, I met Dasho Karma Tshering, Dasho Dzongdha of Bumthang, the highest local civil servant, who had already been personally instructed by the Home Minister to take care of my issue, as well as Mr. Fritz Maurer who gave me much useful information about the history and the recent developments of the region and who also introduced me to Dr. Walter Roder and his adorable wife Kunzang Choden. I would also like to express my gratitude to both of them for lots of information and good advice.

After my visit to Bumthang District, I returned to Thimphu and had meeting with H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, the Home Minister, Ministry of Home & Cultural and Mr. E. Werner Külling. Mr. Namgyel Tshering and Ms. Dorji Yangki were also present during this fruitful conversation. Further, I visited the Department of Culture and met, among others, Mr. Tshewang Gyalpo, Chief Division of Cultural Property, who is responsible for moveable cultural artifact as well as Mr. Phochu Dorji, the Civil Engineer of the cultural authority.

The three excavation sites I wanted to inspect (**Batpalathang**, **Yuwashing dzong** and **Drapham dzong**) are all situated in Bumthang (Central Bhutan). There, I stayed at the Swiss Guesthouse. First I visited the sites which Reto Blumer had already investigated. Afterwards, I went to the ruin which the Bhutanese government has selected to become a site for a major excavation.

In order to reasonably identify castle ruins in Central Bhutan, it is necessary to visit the Bhutanese *Dzong* buildings. These are fortresses which even today are used as administration centres as well as monasteries. Nearly all of them were built in the first half of the 17th century in strategically important places by the first ruler of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Most of the *Dzongs* were renovated several times after fires or earthquakes, in many cases they were even completely reconstructed – but despite all interventions, they are still highly impressive castle grounds which are inhabited resp. used side by side by the clergy (primarily by monks of the Drukpa Kagyupa school) as well as the administration. The most important part of these fortresses is *utse*, a tower with mighty walls which accommodates the main shrine and also the monks' cells. It is surrounded by other monastery chambers. In many cases, a courtyard separates this building – which is reserved for the clergy – from the administrative building. This separation is clearly visible at the **Jakar Dzong**, the imposing fortress in Bumthang which was most probably founded around 1550 as a monastery and then converted into a *Dzong* in the early 17th century. In 1897, the *Dzong* was destroyed by an earthquake and then rebuilt in 1905. In 1908, a watchtower was constructed which also serves as a water reservoir. An interesting aspect about this facility is the *Chu dzong*, a mounted drinking water frame at the foot of the castle which was accessible by a guard's walkway comprising several fortified towers with wooden staircases. Today, it is not open to the public. This *Dzong* still serves traditional functions, i.e. it is inhabited by monks and is the administrative and court building for Bumthang district. The prominent **Semtokha Dzong**, 6 km south of Thimphu (1629 start of construction works, but mostly built in 1671), is currently undergoing complete renovation and is being reconstructed in order to build an educational institution. It is a good example for the cultivated handling of historical buildings by the monument authority in Bhutan today.

The **Drugyel Dzong** in the Paro valley (built in 1647 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, extended in 1651, burnt down in 1951) is the ruin of a stronghold built on a cliff in order to help protect against attacks by Tibetans invading from the north. Most impressive is here the huge *utse* tower which acts as a sacral zone as well as the fortified access to the drinking water reservoir. Today, this ruin is unprotected and is slowly decaying.

Besides these *dzong* buildings, I also visited a number of monasteries and temples, most notably the Changangkha temple near Thimphu and the Tamshing monastery in Bumthang. My interest was particularly focused on ancient mural paintings – my quest however remained unsuccessful. I was either denied access to the shrine or the paintings were qualitatively rather moderate, most of them had clearly been renovated or completely repainted in the 20th century. Most gratifying were my visits to the open-air Museum for Folk Culture (built with the support of Helvetas) and the Museum of Textiles – both in Thimphu – as well as a paper-mill where the Bhutanese speciality, paper from daphne bark, is made.

On the King's birthday, I participated in a parade featuring music-bands and mask dancers in Jakar. I was also able to visit three traditional farm houses and accept several private invitations with pleasure.



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Fig.1 View of Jakar dzong, Bumthang valley (Bhutan), November 2006

Fig.2 Inside of Jakar dzong, Bumthang valley (Bhutan), November 2006

Fig.3 The site of Batpalathang in Bumthang valley (Bhutan), November 2006

Fig.4 Remains of Yuwashing dzong in the middle Bumthang valley, November 2006



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### 1. The excavation site Batpalathang in the middle Bumthang valley

A large proportion of this site which was investigated by Reto Blumer during an emergency excavation had to be filled up resp. was overbuilt after the excavation ended and the construction works on the education complex started. Only the most striking finding, an almost spherical, small cellar-vault with stone slabs roofing and a lateral tunnel, were secured and remained visible. This part of a fortress from the 9th century – as assumed by the archaeologist Blumer – is now accessible via a wooden staircase and is protected against the rain by a simple lean-to roof. During my visit however, there was ground water in the vault with its beautifully built walls and the remains of the walls weren't properly consolidated any more. Nevertheless, this specimen of the excavation is impressive; it would indeed be desirable to erect an information panel at the entrance as well as the possibility of being able to view resp. obtain information about the excavation in the library or at the reception of the institute built next to it.

### 2. The Yuwashing Dzong fortress ruin in the middle Bumthang valley

During their last stay in Bumthang, Reto Blumer and his team carried out prospectations in the surroundings of this emergency excavation site. During their reconnaissance, they came across the ruin of the Yuwashing fortress which they had heard about from local person's renown for historical knowledge, based on oral traditions. They roughly measured the remains of the walls of the 250×50m facility and they drew up a synopsis for a substantial excavation at this location. For this reason, I climbed this hilltop above the Tamshing monastery (founded around 1500) with Mr. Namgyel Tshering, my escort from Helvetas, and a local guide, in order to visualize the condition and extent of the facility.



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The Yuwashing ruin is situated on the ridge of a hill which lies in front of a steep (4,075 m high) mountain ridge. This is without doubt a strategically convenient location for a fort, given the view over the entire fertile valley floor of the Choekhor valley in the middle Bumthang region. Today, the ruin and the hill are heavily overgrown with scrubs, bamboo, shrubbery and trees. The remains of the walls are hardly higher than one metre, but their course is still visible over long stretches. Within a curtain wall, buildings with mostly rectangular ground plans were built on different levels. During the 20th century however, cubic blocks were removed time and again, notably in order to extend the temple grounds of Kurjee on the opposite side of the river.

Tradition has it that this ruin is yet another fortification of the ruler Chokhar Deb who also built Drapham dzong, the fortress which the government of Bhutan has selected as the first archaeological research project. Both ruins are similar to each other whereas Drapham dzong isn't only in better shape but is also situated in a much more impressive location and were also probably significantly bigger than Yuwashing dzong.

### 3. The castle ruin Drapham Dzong in the upper part of the middle Bumthang valley

During my trip to Drapham dzong (also called Drabai or Draphe dzong), Mr. Namgyel Tshering and I were accompanied by Mr. Phochu Dorji, the Civil Engineer of Cultural Authority, as well as a young architect from the local administration and the Cultural Officer from Bumthang. We drove approx. 20 km on a gravel road (built by Helvetas) upstream past the village of Thangbi where the annual and famous *thangbi miwang* («fire blessing» festivity) takes place at the beginning of October. We then finally reached the Ngang-Lhakhang settlement where we had to cross a not always passable bridge. At the end of the road there is a suspension bridge, also built by Helvetas, which spans across the Choekhor river. The small hamlet is mentioned in the Bhutan travel guide by Pommaret (2006: 192) because a historic trek begins here which stretches from Bumthang over the Himalaya passes to Lhodrak in South Tibet. On foot, an open high valley can be reached by climbing a slight ascent – it is called the «upper Choekhor rise», a highly picturesque area with terraced fields (potatoes, buckwheat), paddocks, grazing cattle and water mills, detached courtyards and a momentarily uninhabited monastery (*lhakhang*) with the private little «swan temple» which was founded according to local tradition in the 16th century. Right beside, an estate (see fig. 9) is situated which was once built by the local aristocratic family and which was recently enlarged. Further, one walks over a swampy field behind which a steep mountain hill rises, circumfluent on both sides by streams in deep gorges.



Fig. 5 The hillock with the ruin of Drapham dzong, November 2006

Fig. 6 View from Drapham dzong into the upper Bhumtang valley, November 2006

Fig. 7 The remains of the uttse (central tower) of Drapham dzong, November 2006



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Already from the foot of the hill, a fantastic panoramic view can be observed over the entire region which appears relatively prosperous with its lush meadows. It is here where in former times the aforementioned trade route passed through. The view is a lot more terrific from the summit due to the fact that this ridge lies impressively between the narrow gorge and the wider high valley with the Phe Pha La pass at approx. 4,000 m. High, partially forested and snow-capped mountain ranges confine the bank – a region which despite its altitude is relatively mild during the winter months because it is sheltered from the wind and sunlit the whole year round.

At the present time there is no proper path which leads up to the fortress ruin, but instead just beaten animal tracks. The steep and partly rugged slope is covered with pines and various deciduous trees as well as loose bushes, bramble, wild roses and fern. During the climb, one crosses various outlines of the walls, presumably curtain walls, before coming across a flat clearance on the ridge – a large inner ward laid out with stone slabs. To the north, a steep pinnacle stands up with tiers and distinctive remains of several buildings. The slightly slanted walls that are approx. 6 m high point to the ruin of the *utse* (central tower with a religious meaning). Aside these walls a further well constructed square fundament is visible. The stonework is carefully joined

by sized stones. The seams were apparently plastered with clay mortar. The wall appears to be relatively stable. These buildings were constructed on the highest point of the hillock and were probably oriented southward. More walls within the curtain wall probably derive from women's living rooms.

South of the large courtyard, presumably construed with stone slabs, which was seamed by at least two fortification walls, a second facility is situated which is said to have served as a safeguard for water supplies. Local reports say that drinking water was scooped and carried from the river. A further tradition as told by Mrs. Kunzang Choden, tells of bamboo canes which were connected by oxtail skins.

Further below the top fortress there are the remains of a long drawn-out hall which possibly marks the walls of horse stables (local tradition). A bit lower down, almost at the foot of the hill, the foundation and the walls of a very large double grain (buckwheat) mill with water inlet and drain are still in good condition. Other sites like caves, walls and unpaired boulders on the rocky hill are known to the local guides.

Even though these miscellaneous ruins have hardly been visited by any outsider, the local inhabitants have special names with meanings for them. One location for instance is called «the iron forge of the Pema Lingpa», and a boulder is even linked with guru Rimpoche, the most famous Buddhist saint of Bhutan, Padmasambhava. But even more important are the stories about the builder and defender of the fortress:

The oral tradition defines the regional ruler Chokhar Deb, sometimes called «*penlop* from Choekhor», as the builder of the fortress. He was apparently involved in a confliction relationship with the local religious leader Pema Lingpa (1450–1521): this powerful warrior was supposed to have forced the latter to salvage holy objects from a lake, the Mebar tsho in the Tang valley. Pema Lingpa unwillingly bowed to the command and cursed the ruler: he should not have any descendants and be struck dead by his enemies. His curse became true, his house died out and he was killed during an attack by Tibetans. (His embalmed hand is still kept in the Tang valley!). Chokhar Deb is known as a «demonic ruler of whom nothing good can be said». During the Tibetan army's conquest of the Drapham Dzong castle at the end of the 15th century, he supposedly blew up the fortress with black powder, thus killing the aggressors. This is why this mountain is considered spooky and has been avoided until now.

### The advantages of Drapham Dzong as an excavation site

It is most probable that this castle of a «Bhutanese robber Knight» was destroyed during an attack around 1500 and that it hadn't been raided or vacated beforehand. The builder apparently died during the battle and the castle was blown up as the Tibetans tried to gain control of it. It is highly probable that until this very day the ruin was never marauded because it is classed as «sinister» by local people and it is very secluded, far away from main traffic roads. Cattle herding boys were supposed to have collected coins and pieces of weapons on the mountain hill in previous decades.

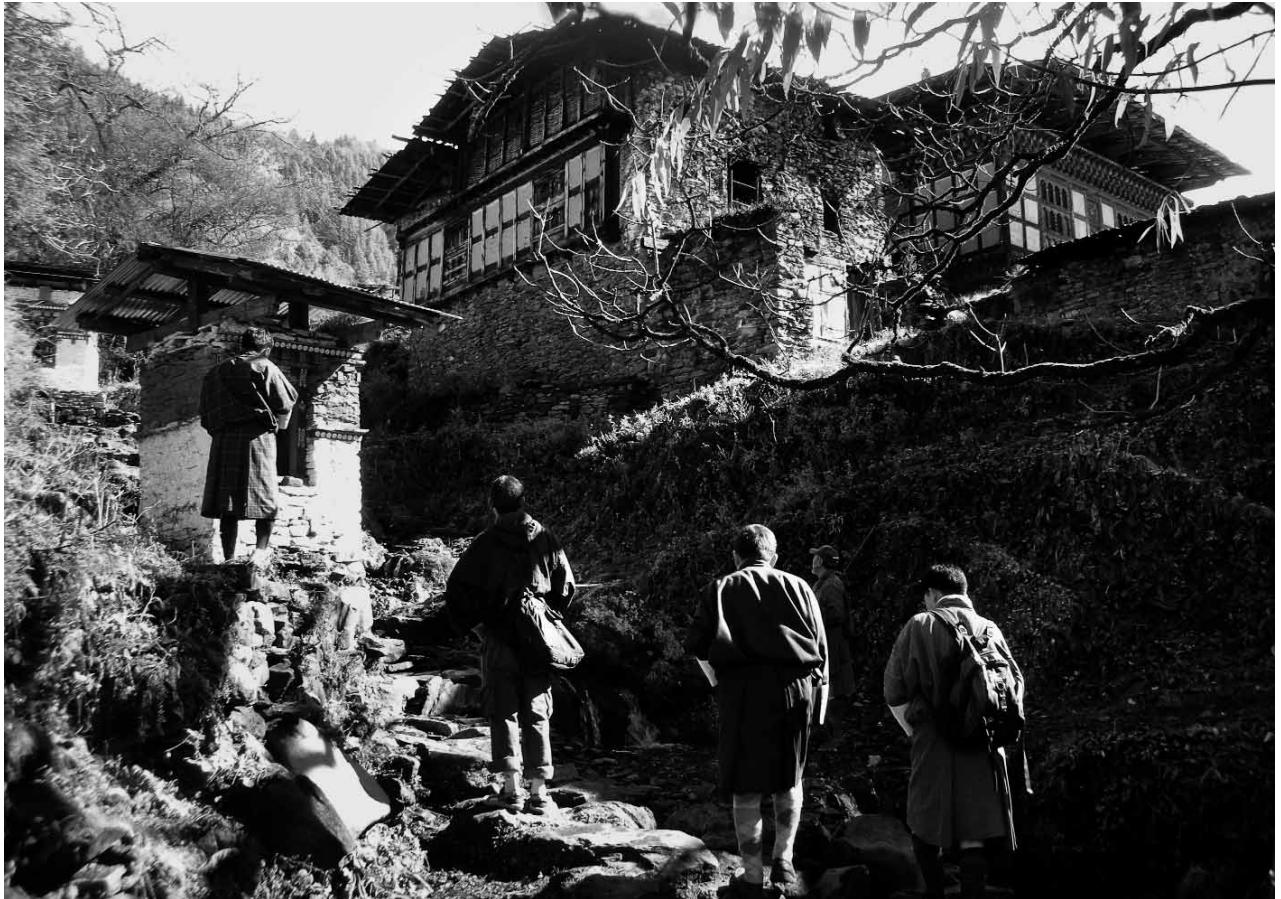
The ruin derives from a castle from an age of which until yet no historical documents exist in Bhutan. The local oral tradition mentions a local ruler called Chakhor Deb or Chakhoer Deb (Dev) as the builder and last owner who «ruled over the valley before the conquest by the Drukpa during the 17th century» (Pommaret, 2006: 192). The fortress is therefore most probably older than all known *dzongs* today. It could be a transitional type between the *gyel khar*, the «fortified royal castle» and the present *dzongs*, the combinations of monastery and barony site. Such *dzongs* were apparently introduced in Bhutan as early on as 1153 AC by invaders from Tibet, thereby replacing earlier built fortified defence towers. The following is said about these towers (Dept. of Works, 1993: 52): «local clans or kings ruled from fortified buildings called *gyel khar*, royal castles. (...) No traces of the actual buildings have been found ... (and) virtually nothing is known about the function and history of the *gyel khars*».

Fig. 8 Remains of walls of Drapham dzong, November 2006

Fig. 9 Ascent to the estate Ngang-Lhakang near Drapham dzong, November 2006



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The three Bumthang valleys are classified as the «holiest region» of Bhutan because several Buddhist saints worked here and founded many monasteries. Bumthang is therefore probably an especially interesting cultural area in Bhutan where various influences have taken effect during the course of history. The climate of the region – which lies between approx. 2,000 to 3,500 m a.s.l. – is healthy, the soils are fertile and the population is relatively well-off. The middle valley is used for agriculture whereas the higher tributary valleys serve the purpose to breed livestock and process wool.

The Drapham dzong ruin isn't considered a sacred place. Therefore – according to the Minister H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley and his staff – no interference by religious groups are to be expected during the excavation. The mountain, already classified as a heritage landmark, belongs to the government (to be more precise, the Forest Department). No compensation must be paid to landowners for an excavation and the legal basis is favourable at the start of an exploration.

It seems that the local population is interested in collaboration with the Department of Culture and the Home Ministry in general. For decades, it has also benefited from Helvetas projects (road and bridge building, the introduction of cancer resistant potatoes, locally called «Swiss red» etc.) and the locals appreciate and recognize this aid. The Home Minister is from this region and has a personal interest in the site proposed for excavation as he was born at a homestead nearby.

The region has a great touristy potential because of its scenic attractiveness. Culture treks with several destinations split into day marches are possible, starting from this location (see Pommaret, 2006: 192). The local inhabitants are very friendly, and many persons have a relatively good command of the English language. At the homestead of Ngang-Lhaxhang, contemporary ecological possibilities are explored, a solar energy plant has been implemented, and there is a great desire to be involved in the touristy development. The owner of the major estate has already built four guest rooms which are, however, right now still unfurnished.

An archaeological project can therefore be interesting for the local population, if, in the long run, it is planned and developed in a way that is economically meaningful for the local community.

The most convenient time of the year for field campaigns is, I am told, from the middle of October (after the harvest) until the middle of December when it becomes cold resp. from February until May, before the rains set in.

### **The disadvantages of Drapham Dzong as an excavation site**

The biggest disadvantage of the site is that it is difficult to reach. The journey from the capital city Thimphu by car takes 8 to 9 hours (plus another 2 hours to the airport at Paro). Further, it is only possible to access the site with an off-road vehicle. The final section to the Drapham dzong can only be covered on foot. The local infrastructure is simple (no electricity and no telephone lines). The nearest hospital (built by Helvetas) is in Bumthang (approx. 20 km) where there are also shopping and overnight stay alternatives (Swiss Guesthouse with access to the internet).

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