Franz-Karl Ehrhard

Pilgrims in Search of Sacred Lands

"Sacred landscape is a constellation of natural phenomena constituted as a meaningful system by means of artificial and religious signs, by telling names or etiological stories fixed to certain places, and by rituals which actualize the space." (Cancik, 1985–1986: 260)

Introduction

Tibetan pilgrimage practices have attracted a lot of scholarly interest in recent years, and it seems that some Tibetologists have become pilgrims themselves, engaged in search for sacred lands in the Himalayan valleys and in Tibet proper. Concerning the motivation of the individual Tibetan pilgrim who descends from the harsh climate of the trans-Himalaya to the heat and humidity of the regions in the south, I quote two statements that can be found in the relevant literature. They were produced by Tibetan pilgrims – a layman and an educated lama – when asked for the “basic reason” or “main cause” (rtsa don) for their spiritual travels:

Why did I go on pilgrimage you ask? All of pilgrimage comes from the utterance of the Buddha. Without the utterance of the Buddha nothing of pilgrimage would exist. Because of the utterance of the Buddha I made the round of the gNas. The utterance of the Buddha was the rTsa-don.

gNas-skor comes out of the utterance of the Buddha just as all of religion has so come into being .... It is not like the rules which are set down in the sūtras and which one must obey, yet it is the utterance of the Buddha, nevertheless, which is the root of pilgrimage.¹

Concerning the motivation of Tibetologists in their search for understanding sacred lands we will not find the same unanimity; but we can detect at least one common feature with the Tibetan pilgrims. The “utterance of the Buddha” again functions as the mainspring of their endeavours: this is the case if we take this expression in the sense of religious books or texts of Buddhism, especially those which describe the spiritual qualities of a landscape considered sacred by the Tibetan tradition. Obtaining a copy of the so-called “guidebook” (lam yig) or “inventory” (dkar chag[s]) of a specific site means for the Tibetologist to gain access to the “utterance of the Buddha” describing that specific site.

Since the inventory to the region of Mustang as a sacred land has already been dealt with on several occasions – and since the subject of this paper is the “search” of pilgrims – I propose to follow another track: I will consult the “biographies” (rnam thar) of two Tibetan lamas who have visited the pilgrimage sites in northern and southern Mustang at different times.² We thus get a glimpse into the sacred landscape as it was conceived by individual pilgrims. Like the guide-books and the inventories, the biographies survive as manuscripts in village temples and in households or in modern day library collections.

¹ For making available the writings of Sangye Sangpo from the Tucci Tibetan Fund I have to acknowledge the help of E. De Rossi Filibeck and the staff of the Istituto per l’Africa et l’Oriente, Rome. Words of thanks also to Niels Gutschow for providing the two maps, to John Harrison for the sketch of Gekar, and to Hilde Peetz for joining a tour to Northern Mustang in the summer of 1995.

² For the dkar-chag[s] genre as the primary “literary aspect” of Tibetan pilgrimage see Large-Blondeau 1960: 213–15. A critical stance against this genre as “only superficially helpful” and as “obliterat[ing] landscape” is taken by Huber 1994: 34 and by Rample 1995: 115–16; compare the view in Ehrhard 1997: 336–346 that the existence of corresponding texts, i.e. inventories and guide-books, generates perception of sacred landscape in the Tibetan cultural sphere.
Map documenting Orgyen Chöphel's pilgrimages to Bodhnāth and Svayambhūnāth in Nepal in 1791 and to Mustang in 1801. Drawing Niels Gutschow
Orgyen Chöphel and his travels to Congzhi and Muktināth

This lama was born in the year 1755 in the region of the sacred mountain Kang Tise (Kailāśa) in Western Tibet. He received the name Orgyen Chöphel (“The one who increases the teaching of Orgyen [Rinpoche]”) because he was born on the tenth day of the Tibetan month, which is dedicated to the memory of Guru Padmasambhava. The most important teacher of Orgyen Chöphel was a Sakya master from the Ngorpa tradition called Ngawang Künga Lhündrub (d. 1773); this master had founded a monastery at the site of Pöri near the sacred lake Mapam Tsho (Mānosārovar), and it was there that the young boy received his spiritual training. A special feature of this training was that he obtained mainly transmissions of “treasure teachings” (gter chos) of the Nyingmapa school from the discoveries of Rigzin Garwang Dorje (1640–1685) and Rigzin Jatsön Nyingpo (1585–1656); this is not surprising given that his teacher, Ngawang Künga Lhündrub, was regarded as an incarnation of the last-named treasure-discoverser.

Until his thirty-fifth year, i.e. up to 1790, Orgyen Chöphel stayed mainly at the monastery of Pöri, and he interrupted his spiritual practices only occasionally to visit important temples in the Kang Tise region. The autobiography mentions especially the temple of Khochak (Khojarnāth) as the main goal of these “regional pilgrimages” of Orgyen Chöphel; on this spot he circumambulated and paid his respects to the three statues of Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇī, known to Tibetan pilgrims under the name “Lords [who are the] protectors of the three [tantric] families” (jo bo rigs gsum mgon po).

3 For the early education of Orgyen Chöphel see rNam-thar I, fols. 27b/2–36b/2 (chos sgor zhugs pa’i gros byas tshul); the complete text covers events up to the year 1811. Pöri is an old sacred site in the Mapam Tsho region known to followers of the Bönpo school; see Tenzin Namdak: Lung gi snying po, pp. 40.17–18. For the term “The great sacred sites, the mountains and the lake, [these] three” (gnas chen ri mtsho gsum) – comprising the two mountains Kang Tise and Pöri, together with the sacred lake Mapam Tsho – see also (Bellezza 1997: 16).
The first of his travels which can be understood in the sense of a “transregional pilgrimage” started in 1791 and brought Orgyen Chöphel to the region of Mangyül and its district town Kyirong. After visiting the temple of Jamdrin he came into the presence of the famous Jowo Wati Sangpo, a statue of Padmapānī Lokeśvara which is believed to have manifested itself miraculously from a sandalwood tree. He then met the “incarnation” (sprul sku) of his teacher Ngawang Künga Lhündrub in the monastery of Draphu Chöling. Afterwards the journey continued on to Nepal, where he brought offerings to the stūpas of Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth, but was not able to visit the minor shrines in the valley. Here we have to keep in mind that in 1791 the Nepal-Tibet war was in its final stage and that – according to the words of Orgyen Chöphel – the danger of attracting diseases was very high. The return trip led through the valley of Lande, and after paying another visit to the incarnation of his teacher in Draphu Chöling the pilgrim came to the end of his wanderings in the temple of Tradūn in the area of Jang, like Jamdrin a religious building which was said to have been erected by Songtsen Gampo, considered to be the first Buddhist king of Tibet. 

The temple of Tradūn in Jang served now as the starting point for the second “transregional pilgrimage” of Orgyen Chöphel; it began exactly ten years after the journey to Mangyül and Nepal, i.e. in 1801. This journey brought him to the sacred sites of Northern and Southern Mustang and also in close – and not so close – contact with the rulers of these regions. After reaching Mönthang, the capital of Northern Mustang, the Nyingmapa teacher from Western Tibet soon obtained an audience with Wangyal Dorje, the “Dharmarāja” (chos rgyal) of Mustang. The reason for this swift contact was a renovation project in the Kang Tise area which had received financial assistance from the king of Mustang in recent times.

4 The description of the pilgrimage to Mangyül and the Nepal Valley can be found in rNam-thar I, fols. 101b/3–106b/6. The most accessible pilgrimage guide to the temple of Khojarnāth is by Ngawang Sönam Gyaltsen, another member of the Ngorpa tradition: Rin chen vaiṭārya sngon po’i pi va’. For the significance of temples dating to the early royal period in the search for Himalayan sacred lands see Ehrhard 1994: 10–11.
The conversation between the king and the lama touched mainly upon this renovation and the spiritual affiliations of Wangyal Dorje and Orgyen Chöphel; the king himself stated that he belonged to “the teaching tradition of the great Vidyādhara” (rig ’dzin chen po’i chos brgyud) i.e. the lineage of Kathog Rigdzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755). For the lama it was the proper moment to reflect upon the motivation for his journey to Mustang:

[If you ask:] “What is the reason that I have come now to this country?” it is to circumambulate and offer prayers to the sacred places [here], the principal ones [being] the “Hundred-and-some Springs” – the pilgrimage site which was prophesied in the brTag gnyis, [i.e.] the Hevajratantra – and the vihāra of Gekar with the nine roofs: the earliest [case of] taming the ground in the realm of Tibet which the Guru [Padmasambhava] [undertook].

5 See rNam-thar I, fol. 144a/6-b/1 (da lam sa phyogs ’div yong ba don ga lags / kye rdo rje rtsa brgyud (=rgyud) rtag (=brtag) gnyis las / lung zin gnas chen chu mig brgya rtsa dang / gu ru’i bod kham sa ’dul snga ba dge sgar gtsug lag dgu thog gi (=gis) tsos (=gtsos) gnas skor smon lam ’debs pa ...). Although the site is known in most of the sources under the name “[Temple of] White Virtue” (dge dkar), the meaning is here “Encampment of Virtue” (dge sgar). This spelling is also preserved in “dGon-pa sGar” as contained in a modern pilgrimage guide; see Menla Phantshog: dNgul dkar me long, p. 88.5–6.
This statement by Orgyen Chöphel to the king of Mustang gives us a first impression of the strategy governing how sacred landscape was created in a Himalayan context, and of the way individual sites became places which kept up the memory of Buddhist saints like Padmasambhava. In the case of Muktināth – or “Hundred-and-some Springs” as it was known to Tibetan pilgrims – the toponym Munmunī, one of the four “fields” (kṣetra) according to the Indian pitṛha-tradition of the Hevajratantra, was transplanted from an Indian setting to the Himalayan region of southern Mustang. Generally this transposition entailed the formation of pilgrimage centres in the Tibet of the 12th and 13th centuries.

The act of “taming the ground” (sa ‘dal) has particular relevance to the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet and to the Himalayan experience of it. The temples said to have been built during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo were erected “to tame the borders and the areas beyond the borders”, and the legends of how Padmasambhava subdued the local spirits and converted wild and uncultivated regions to the Buddhist faith are uncountable. The case of the vīhāra of Gekar in Northern Mustang was seen as the prototype of this act of taming the earth by erecting religious edifices, and we will have a closer look at this temple later on. Let us follow now again the steps of Orgyen Chöphel and see if there are further memorial sites that he encountered during his pilgrimage in Mustang.

Having paid his respects at the different monasteries and temples of Mönthang and having received a “passport, [i.e.] an official document” (lam yig bka’ shog) from King Wangyal Dorje, the lama left the capital of Northern Mustang and reached the town of Tsarang (“tsang rang”) soon afterwards. There he learned of a pilgrimage site known for its many sacred items that had formed naturally; this place was known by the name Congzhi [= mukτhat] before the vihāra of Gekar and Garphug.

This lama originated in the region of Kham in Eastern Tibet, where he was born in the year 1894. He received the name Sangye Sangpo (“Good Buddha”) from Orgyen Chemchag, a teacher who was regarded as an incarnation of Longchenpa (1308–1364); the list of his early teachers also includes the treasure-discoverer Sögyal Rinpoche (1856–1926). The most important influence on the spiritual career of Sangye Sangpo was exercised by the Khampa master Shenphen Chökyi Nangwa (1871–1927), generally known by his nickname Shen-ga (gzhan dga’). In the period from his twenty-third to his thirty-fourth year – i.e. from 1916 up to 1927 – Sangye Sangpo attended mainly upon this teacher, who gave a new orientation to the non-Gelugpa traditions of Buddhist learning in Eastern Tibet; the chief places where he studied under Shen-ga and other masters of the Nyimapa tradition were the monasteries of Dzogchen, Shechen and Surmang.

6 For the process of the transposition of the Vajrakīvara as set down in the Buddhist tantras in the case of Mukτināth see Ehrhard 1993: 23–24. The term sa ‘dal and its implications for the Himalayan experience was dealt with by Aris 1990: 94–96. A temple in the Barbung Valley, between Jumla and Muktināth, bears the name “Temple of the ground where was named” (sa ‘dal dgon pa); see Ehrhard, 1998: 5–7.

7 A part of the gnas-yig of Congzhi was also incorporated into the itinerary of the pilgrimage places of the Muktināth area; see Ehrhard, 1993: 29–30. A more complete text with the title Cong zhi rang byon gri gnas yig can be found in Menlha Phüntshog: dNgul dkar me long, pp. 89–90.

8 The pilgrimage to Congzhi, Mukτināth and Gekar is contained in rNam-thar I, fols. 152b/6–156b/2; for further information on the teacher Gyalwang Senge see Ehrhard 1998: 4 & note 5. The rise of the Tibetan enclave in the Muktināth Valley and the lineage of its rulers up to the middle of the 18th century is dealt with by Schuh 1994: 42–54; for the political situation in the Muktināth Valley in the 19th century and the position of Northern Mustang during the transition of power from Jumla to the king of Gorkha see also Schuh 1994: 42–53 & 54–68. Compare the description of the role of Wangyal Dorje during the Nepal-Tibet war in Jackson 1984: 151; this king of Mustang also renovated the temple of Gekar.

9 The first and second chapters of the autobiography of Sangye Sangpo (written in 1945) are devoted to the region of his birth and his religious traditions, and to his own spiritual training; see rNam-thar II, fols. 3a–9a (skyes pa’i yul gyi rnam grangs bshad pa), and fols. 9a–30a (dam pa’i lha chos la zhung nas dka’ ba spyad tshul).
Map documenting Sangye Sangpo’s pilgrimages to Central Tibet in 1929 to 1931, to Tsari, Bodhgaya, the Kathmandu valley in 1932 and Mangyul in 1933. In 1934 he turned to Delhi before he reached Kang Tise (Mount Kailash). From 1935 to 1942 he stayed at Garphug, Marpha and finally Gekar.

Drawing Niels Gutschow
After the death of his main teacher Sangye Sangpo embarked on a journey which we can call an “international pilgrimage”. Leaving Eastern Tibet in 1928, he reached the monastery of Samye and the sacred sites located nearby in the year 1929; up to 1931 he stayed in Central Tibet, visiting such monasteries as Dorjedrag and Mindröl Ling, paying homage to statues like the Jowo Jampal Dorje in Rateng, and seeing places like Kangri Tökar, the favourite hermitage of Longchenpa. It should be noted that he exchanged teachings along the way with other religious dignitaries, one being the Zim-og Rinpoche (born 1884) of Phenyül Nalendra; this institution was at that time one of the few large Sakyapa monasteries within a day or two’s journey from Lhasa. During this very period a “seminary for textual exposition” (bshad grwa) at Phenyül Nalendra was headed by another Khampa disciple of Shen-ga.

For Sangye Sangpo the time had not yet come for a fixed abode and regular sessions of teachings. In 1932 – a “monkey year” (sprel lo), the year in which pilgrimages to Tsari are traditionally undertaken – he had the idea of joining the great pilgrimage to that sacred land in the south-eastern border region of Tibet. Having attended religious ceremonies conducted by Drigung Kyabgon Shiwä Lodrö (1886–1943), he left for the monastery of Dagla Gampo and afterwards arrived at the holy mountain Dagpa Shelri and other pilgrimage places in Tsari; the autobiography makes special mention of the auspicious signs that occurred when Sangye Sangpo paid his respects to the statue of the Jarme Jowo. Crossing over to Bhutan (‘brug yul), the pilgrim continued on to India, where he visited Bodhgaya, the historic site of Buddha Śākyamuni’s enlightenment. The next country he saw was Nepal and the objects of his veneration there were the shrines of Svayambhūnāth, Bodhnāth and Namo Buddha, recognised by Tibetan pilgrims as the “three kinds of stūpas” (mchod rten mam gsam). At a memorial site of Padmasambhava to the south-west of the Kathmandu valley, which is called by Tibetans “Spring Enlightenment Nectar” (Chu mig byang chub bdud rtsi) and by Nepalese “Ṛṣīvara”, he met a fellow pilgrim who reported to him about the numerous sacred items that are located in the region of Mangyül, the foremost one being the statue of Jowo Wati Sangpo in Kyirong. The lama from Kham followed up this hint in his search for sacred lands, and was soon circumambulating the building which housed the self-manifested Avalokiteśvara and the temple of Jamdrin.

Passing his thirty-ninth year in 1933, he finally arrived at a small monastery where he found some rest from his tireless travelling and which served as a kind of base camp for his activities during the next twelve years. This monastery was located at Dragkar Taso, the famous
The site of Tibet’s great yogin Milarepa; the teacher from Kham was given a warm welcome there by the resident lama Tenzin Norbu (1899–1959) and his father Trinle Chöwang (1879–1940). In the company of father and son he made excursions to other sacred sites in the region and undertook a retreat for several months. Sangye Sangpo also conducted teaching-sessions at Dragkar Taso, and among his audience we find two persons who hailed from the region of Northern Mustang. They were Kushab Ludrup and his son, who was called Garphug Tulku; we can thus identify them as the lamas in charge of the monastery Garphug. In 1934 Kushab Ludrup issued an official invitation to the Khampa teacher to visit their monastery, which is located to the northeast of Mönthang. It took another year before Sangye Sangpo followed up this invitation. The reason was another pilgrimage to India and Nepal, where he was able to visit further historical sites associated with the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, i.e. Rajgir, Sarnath, Kushinagara and Lumbini. Passing the sacred lake of Tsho Pema or Rewalsar, north of Mandir, and after a prolonged stay in Delhi he took the route through Kinnaur to the Kang Tise region. Before circumambulating the sacred mountain several times – performing the so-called “circle of the snow [-mountain]” (gangs skor) – he met there the Bönpo master Khyung Trül Jigme Namkha Dorje (1897–1955), himself a disciple of Pema Dewā Gyelpo (1873–1933) from Kham. As in the case of Orgyen Chöphel, the temple of Tradün in Jang served Sangye Sangpo as the starting point for another section of his “international pilgrimage”: the sacred sites of Mustang. In 1935 he...
reached the monastery of Garphug, characterising the site with the words: “it is known to have received the blessings of [Kathog] Rigzin Tshewang Norbu” (rig ’dzin tshe dbang nor bu’i byin rlabs par grags pa). Staying there for the rest of the year, he composed several works, including a guidebook to the pilgrimage places in India (rgya gar gnas yig).

The next year he journeyed to the south in the company of Garphug Tulku. The description of the sacred landscape contained in the autobiography of Sangye Sangpo differs from the earlier one of Orgyen Chöphel in one particular aspect: it includes memorial sites of Padmasambhava to the south of Muktināth and in the region of Thag. The first place he visited was the village of Thini [som bhi] and a temple, containing the relics of Padmasambhava which had come forth from a treasure of Rigzin Düdul Dorje (1615–1672) from Kham. In Thag it was a cave that reminded the Tibetan pilgrim of the former presence of Padmasambhava; it was called the “Secret Cave of the Guru” (gu ru gsang phug). Having stopped in the monasteries of Marpha [mar phag] and Tsherok [tshe rog], he then directed his steps to the site of “Hundred-and-some Springs”, i.e. Muktināth. Sangye Sangpo thus visited the sacred sites that make up the main part of the inventory of the pilgrimage places in Mustang. The text itself starts with Muktināth and ends with a description of the Dhaulagiri Himal and the “Secret Cave of the Guru”.¹²

After this first pilgrimage to southern Mustang and the region of Thag the lama from Kham proceeded to the temple of Gekar in the year 1937; his stay at this most important pilgrimage site of northern Mustang lasted for nearly five years, i.e. up to 1942. Among his first activities there the autobiography mentions a “minor renovation” (zhig gso phran) of the vihāra and the composition of a guidebook to that place.

Although this text has not surfaced up to now, we have at least a reference to the etiological myth of the sacred site as it was written down in this text. Sangye Sangpo refers to that myth on the occasion of building a new “house for spiritual practices” (sgrub khang) there:

“Now, what is called “Lowo Gekar”: when Guru Rinpoche [=Padmasambhava] erected [the monastery of] Samye, because the gods and spirits headed by the nāgas [snakes] and rākṣasīs [demonesses] created obstacles, [he had] to suppress [them and thus] erected on the heart of the supine rākṣasī of Mustang a nine-storied vihāra, and on her [outstretched] limbs hundred-and-some stūpas and so on. [This has been written down] more extensively in the description of the sacred site. Accordingly I gave the name “Island of All embracing
Light" to that site of spiritual practice, which is said to have been that [same] hermitage that was in earlier times called the “Treasure-place” [of Sangye Lama].

As this quotation shows, the mythical foundation of the temple of Gekar is closely connected with the erection of Tibet’s oldest monastery by the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava. The act of pinning down the demons – or taming the ground – which we generally know from the legends concerning King Songtsen Gampo, is thereby applied to the local context of Mustang. Another hint of the antiquity of the site is its status as a place, where Sangye Lama (b. ca. 1000), the first treasure-discoverer of the Nyingmapa school, had unearthed some of his findings. The aura of the sacred landscape also inspired Sangye Sangpo: he wrote down a general introduction to the philosophical and spiritual doctrine of that school, and in 1938 also erected a stūpa near the temple, filling it with precious relics. At the end of this year a second pilgrimage was conducted to Southern Mustang; on that occasion he followed an invitation of the “sponsors of the region of Thag” (thags phyogs sbyin bdag rnam). Having made offerings at the so-called secret cave, he again put up at the monastery of Marpha and conducted rituals for the local population; in the process the custom of sacrificing animals (dmar mchod) was changed into one of using substitute offering substances (dkar mchod). He then visited again Gompa Gang [~gon pa sgang], i. e. the monastery near Thini, where relics from the findings of Rgzin Düdul Dorje were kept, and paid special attention to the religious buildings, which were in a state of decay at that time. Concerning teachers who had earlier stayed there, the name of Kathog Rgzin was still remembered together with that of Künsang Longyang (1644-1699) from “the region of the gorge of Jumla” (rong ’dzum lang phyogs), a direct disciple of Orgyen Pālsang (1617–1677), who had founded the monastery. The former presence of Kathog Rgyas was still felt and sensed by the pilgrim, the syllable ʰāṃ having manifested miraculously on a resting place during the visit of this master from Kham in 1750. Returning to Gekar, Sangye Sangpo settled down to stay there for most of the time until the year 1942; either there or at Garphug he instructed a growing number of disciples. He also followed up on an invitation to Mönthang and gave teachings to a group of Sakya monks headed by a certain Tashi Chöphel. Eventually he left Mustang and, using his base camp in Dragkar Taso for another journey – this time to the sacred sites of Milarepa in Lachi – he finally settled in the region of Mangyül for longer sessions of teachings; among the persons who sent their disciples to him we find the Bhutanese lhama Sherab Dorje (1884–1945). In that region Sangye Sangpo had a residence of his own which he called “Palace of Great Bliss” (bde chen pho brang); it was there that his work on the Dzogchen doctrine, written in Gekar, was carved on wooden blocks, sponsored by the local population.
Conclusion

The pilgrimages of Orgyen Chöphel and Sangye Sangpo and their search for sacred lands in Northern and Southern Mustang have led us to several sites and corresponding legends. It should now be possible – by reviewing the individual sites once again – to sketch the different cultural contexts which framed the sacred landscape in this particular Himalayan region. First we have to consider the following three possibilities through which a particular piece of territory was perceived in an idealised and spiritualised way:

1. In the case of Muktināth we could see how a sacred realm was created by transplanting the spiritual geography of the Buddhist tantras from India to the Himalayan region. The pilgrimage site came into being through an act of transposition or transcription.

2. The legendary topography of the foundation myth of Gekar is a good example of how sacred landscape was created by etiological stories. Religious buildings – and statues – kept alive the memory of
an important event in the mythical past (a statue of Padmasambhava in his likeness is kept to the present day in the vihāra of Gekar).

3. Memorial sites are also based on historical narratives as documented by the site of Gompa Gang or Kutshab Ternga. The narratives in this case refer to the foundation of the monastery by Orgyen Pālsang (in 1668) or to later visits by great religious teachers like Kathog Rigdzin from Khams (in 1750).

The two caves that we encountered in Northern and Southern Mustang – i.e. Congzhi and the “Secret Cave of the Guru” – show that this is not a clear-cut scheme and that two possibilities can also
apply to a specific site at the same time. First, it is stated, by both the inventory and the autobiographies considered here, that Padmasambhava set foot on these two spots on the left bank of the Kali Gandaki River; the caves are thus included in the legendary topography of the saint’s activities in Mustang. Secondly, the two caves can also be considered as memorial sites; this becomes more clear when we look at the corresponding historical narratives associated with them.

Through texts like the above-mentioned praise of the sacred site a visitor to Congzhi in Northern Mustang is reminded of the former presence of a Drugpa Kagyü master who was active at the court of the king of Mustang in the 17th century. It is thus plausible to argue that the site gained prominence as a goal for pilgrims at about this time. If the thesis holds that the initial vision which was responsible for the idealisation and spiritualisation of the Dhaulagiri Himal – and the region of Thag – can be traced back to a member of the princely family of Dzar (in the Muktināth Valley) in the year 1740, on the other hand, the time frame for the popularisation of the cave in southern Mustang would be the 18th century. We could thus speak of a process of sacralising the natural environment in a movement from north to south.

There is still little knowledge about the founding dates of monasteries in the region of Thag. But at least in the case of Tsherok, which was visited by Sangye Sangpo, the fact is now available that its founder was a certain Künsang Rigidröl Dorje (1731–1792) from Mangyül in the year 1791; see rNam-thar 1, fol. 106a/7–b/1.

More details on the stone statue of the “Lord of Nari” [= sna-ri / gnya’ ri jo bo] above Larjung and on its description in the inventory are given by Ehrhard 1993: 29 & 34, note 21; compare the information on the so-called “Arya [Avalokiteśvara] who liberates from the six forms of existence” (phags pa ’gro ba drug sgrol) in Lahul (West Tibet) in Schubert 1935: 127–136. The iconographical details of this statue apply also to the one above Larjung; thus the doubts of Vinding 1998: 290, note 19, concerning a form of Avalokiteśvara with six arms should be cleared away. For the visits of the custodians responsible for the statue in Thag to the region of Mangyül see Chökyi Wangchuk: Khrol snang sgyu ma’i rol rted, fol. 225b/5 ff., 229b/5 ff. & 257/6 ff.; these journeys took place during the year 1831.