KM-III EXPLORATION REPORT[1]

A Reconnaissance Mission to Locate the Sri Ashtapad Temple

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John Vincent Bellezza

(Senior Research Fellow, Tibet Center, University of Virginia, USA)

Introduction

The objective of the KM-III Expedition was to determine the precise location of Sri Ashtapad, the most elusive of Jain temples. According to Jain scriptures, the first of the 24 *tirthankara*, Sri *Rishabdev*, the Adinath Bhagavan, went atop Mount Kailas for *santhara* (fasting until death). It was at Mount Kailas that Lord Adinath achieved the glorious nirvana. To honor and commemorate his father's enlightenment, King Bharat Chakravarti, the eldest of 99 sons, is believed to have constructed Sri Ashtapad, also called the Ratnamay palace, somewhere at Mount Kailas. In Jain literature, Sri Ashtapad is recorded as being eight-stepped, four-sided and probably very extensive. This marvelous edifice is said to have housed the Sri Chouvishi (sculptures of the 24 *tirthankara*) in the *gabhara* (main place of worship).

Unfortunately, the identity and location of Sri Ashtapad have been lost to time. Jain scholars cite timescales measured in the thousands or millions of years ago to account for its passing, complicating any attempt at scientific analysis. As I understand it, there is also a school of Jain thought that holds that accounts about Sri Ashtapad are metaphorical in nature, encapsulating high spiritual truths, rather than a literal description of a temple edifice. This doctrinal perspective seems to be supported by the words of Bhagavan Mahavira (599–527 BCE), the 24th and final *tirthankara*, when he tells his Jain *tapas* (saints engaged in austerities) that the one who scales Mount Ashtapad and offers prayers there to all the *tirthakara* will surely attain *moksha* (ultimate release). In his momentous sermon, Mahavira alludes to the identification of Sri Ashtapad as a natural mountain.

The findings of the KM-III Expedition encourage the view that Sri Ashtapad is Mount Kailas itself, rather than a man-made temple of epic proportions or otherwise. The reconnaissance conducted yielded absolutely no physical evidence of a Jain monumental presence at Mount Kailas in any chronological period. This absence of discernable Jain ruins and relics occurs in a

[1] The KM-III Expedition was organized and funded by the Ashtapad Research International Foundation, USA. In particular, the time and assistance of Sri Dr. Rajnikant Shah were absolutely essential in the successful launching of the research expedition. Dr. Shah and Dr. Mrs. Shah most generously provided their financial backing and moral support to the members of the KM-III Expedition. It has been a rare privilege to work with such exceptional individuals.

region rich in Bon and Tibetan Buddhist cultural materials, the monuments and artifacts that make up the fabric of Upper Tibetan civilization. Desultory finds of Stone Age lithic artifacts aside, the earliest archaeological horizon detectable at Mount Kailas belongs to the so-called Zhang Zhung civilization, a broadly defined cluster of cultural orders spanning the first millennium BCE and first millennium CE over a large area of Upper Tibet.

The most salient physical feature of the Zhang Zhung civilization at Mount Kailas is the remains of an extensive network of all-stone corbelled residences known in the native parlance as *dokhang* (Tibetan = *rdo-khang*). These robustly built, semi-subterranean edifices dot the slopes of Mount Kailas and its surrounding ridges to a maximum height of 5470 m elevation. These are among the highest archaeological remains found anywhere in Upper Tibet. They also constitute the loftiest permanent residences built anywhere in the world, past or present. An impressive physical feat to be certain.

In other parts of Upper Tibet, the chronometric analysis of organic remains found inside standing *dokhang* and what appear to be the foundations of *dokhang* were carried out separately by Professor Mark Aldenderfer and I.[2] These test results indicate that *dokhang* were already being built by the middle of the first millennium BCE. While none of the all-stone corbelled residences at Mount Kailas have undergone chronometric analysis, we can infer that this unique form of highland settlement came to the region quite early. This is supported by Bon literary accounts that describe the lap of Mount Kailas at Gyangdrak (Tib. = rGyang-grags) as the very first capital of the prehistoric Zhang Zhung kingdom.

Although the ancient ruins of the indigenous Zhang Zhung civilization dominate the flanks of Mount Kailas, this by no means denies an ancient Jain cultural presence at the holy mountain. The predominance of Zhang Zhung cultural materials merely signals that the Jains did not leave monuments behind at Mount Kailas. The scope for the Jains having reached Mount Kailas no later than the time of Mahavira remains strong, for cultural exchanges between the Indian Subcontinent and Upper Tibet are documented in both Indian and Tibetan literature. Bon ritual and meditative texts are replete with Sanskrit mantras and terms thought to have reached Zhang Zhung long before Vajrayana Buddhism washed over the Tibetan Plateau.

While Bon claims of religious intercourse with prehistoric India remain to be satisfactorily assessed, the overall geographical and archaeological picture supports them. The two sides of the Great Himalayan divide offer differing but complimentary ecological resources and cultural products, a very powerful incentive for trade and cooperation. Furthermore, the religious sentiments of Indian peoples have been tied up with the Himalaya for a great deal of time. The suite of textual, utilitarian and religious factors argue strongly that peoples such as the Jains have filtered over the Himalayan barrier for many centuries, carrying ideas, goods and spiritual inspiration along with them.

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[2] See: Mark Aldenderfer, 2003. "A New Class of Standing Stone from the Tibetan Plateau" in *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 28, nos. 1 and 2, pp. 3-20. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives: Dharamsala.
John Vincent Bellezza, 2008. *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet. A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland.* Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Geographic Scope of Exploration
In conjunction with Sri Dr. Rajnikant Shah and a number of Jain textual scholars it was decided that the focus of exploration on the KM-III expedition should be the various valleys and ridges situated on the south side of Mount Kailas (Tib. = Ti-se / Gangs rin-po-che). Among Tibetans this area is known as the inner circuit (Tib. = nang-skor).

According to Jain scholars, the inner circuit is the most likely and compelling location for the Sri Ashtapad temple. Jain textual and cultural indications pointing to the south side of Mount Kailas as possessing much scope for exploration is supported by its optimal geographic situation and Tibetan religious history. Spectacular natural beauty notwithstanding, the inner circuit of Mount Kailas boasts many heightened geomantic qualities. No other location affords such open and immediate views of the massif. The south side of Mount Kailas also receives maximum solar exposure, a key natural endowment in a brutally cold climate. Moreover, there are a surprising number of cave sites, valley branches, flats, and water sources lying in the lap of the mountain fit for human habitation.

The importance of the south side of Mount Kailas is also reflected in Bon scriptures. Great Zhang Zhung saints such as Anutrak and the founder of Bon himself, Shenrab Miwo, are supposed to have meditated and taught on the south side of Mount Kailas. The first capital of Zhang Zhung according to some Bon sources, Gyangdrak Yulojon (Tib. rGyang-grags g.yu-lo-ljon), sits right in the middle of the inner circuit, clearly sealing its status as an exceptionally significant location.

The extremely high regard in which the south side of Mount Kailas was held by the early Bonpo was not lost on their Buddhist successors. In the 11th century CE, a supposed final showdown between the Buddhist yogin Milarapa and his Bonpo rival Naro Bonchung took place on the south side of the mountain. The central vertical fissure on the south face is said to have formed when Naro Bonchung's flying drum tumbled out of the sky during the battle. In the late 12th century CE, the Drigung Kargyu subsect established Serlung and Gyangdrak monasteries in the inner circuit, consolidating Buddhist control.

Given its promising placement, the south side of Mount Kailas was systematically reconnoitered on the KM-III Expedition, beginning on the west end and continuing around to its eastern extremity. While it was not possible to cover every bit of the inner circuit in the five days allotted to its exploration, by visiting strategic points across its reach, a comprehensive picture of the area was assembled.

Exploration Findings
After more than a week of travel and acclimatization, the five members of the KM-III expedition finally entered the inner circuit of Mount Kailas on June 16. Our first camp was established near Serlung monastery.[3] Without losing any time we proceeded along the ridgeline west of Serlung

[3] Due to physical fitness and motivational factors, the hard work of combing the peaks and valleys of the Mount Kailas circuit fell largely to Ms. Sally Walkerman and I. Thanks to years of training and experience, we had the requisite mental and physical reserves demanded of the work. Those leading a sedentary urban lifestyle are hardly in a position to conduct such operations.

monastery. This ridgeline separates the outer circuit of Mount Kailas along the Lha Chu river from the inner circuit. This long outlier is composed of two lesser peaks commonly referred to as Sri Ashtapad by some Jain pilgrims and Shiva Lingam, a peak capped by a natural rock tower situated next to the Kailas massif.

1) The so-called Sri Ashtapad peaks

On June 16, four members of the team scaled the lesser of the two so-called Sri Ashtapad peaks (31° 01.15′ N. lat. / 81° 16.76′ E. long. / 5330 m).[4] Returning on June 20, Ms. Walkerman and I made it to the summit of the higher so-called Sri Ashtapad peak (31° 01.90′ N. lat. / 81° 17.13′ E. long / 5670 m). There were absolutely no archaeological ruins or other signs of human modifications on the summits of the so-called Ashtapad peaks. This is not surprising given the highly exposed nature of these locations. They are too wind-swept, dry and rocky to have made ideal loci of permanent human settlement.

The higher of the two popularly designated Ashtapad peaks provided a fine aerie from which to survey the high ground around the Serlung valley. From this position we could look directly over toward the summit of Shiva Lingam and the peak known to Indians as Nandi. Using our field glasses we determined that these summit ridges are also devoid of ruins. They are simply too high, windswept, cold, and far from water to have been developed for permanent settlement. Their talus-strewn summits are subject to below-freezing weather every day of the year, an impossible environment in which to build temples or any other substantial manmade structures.

Nevertheless, next to the so-called lesser Ashtapad mountain there is a ruined *dokhang* settlement consisting of 16 or 17 all-stone corbelled residences. This site is known as Lungten Phuk (Tib. = Lung-bstan phug).[5] Lungten Phuk occupies a long, steeply inclined ravine sandwiched between the outer and inner circuits of Mount Kailas. There is still a spring fed stream at the lower end of the site. In ancient times, water is likely to have been more plentiful, possibly extending up to a higher series of *dokhang*. Lungten Phuk is protected from the worst of the region's weather. The so-called higher Ashtapad Mountain blocks the site from the northern winds coming off the glaciers of Mount Kailas, a vital consideration. Without exception, the Zhang Zhung archaeological sites around Mount Kailas have the same protected physical aspect. By shutting out northern winds and taking full advantage of a southern exposure, sites like Lungten Phuk are endowed with a relatively amenable microclimate. This is certainly not the case with isolated peaks such as the so-called Sri Ashtapad mountains: they bear the full brunt of a bitterly cold climate.

During KM-III, Ms. Walkerman and I discovered a ruined *dokhang* at Lungten Phuk situated higher than those discovered on an earlier archaeological survey of the site. Designated DK17, this ruined all-stone corbelled structure measures 8.2 m x 9 m (31° 01.46′ N. lat. / 81° 16.74′ E. long. / 5400 m). It appears to have consisted of three tiers of tiny, windowless rooms in the typical *dokhang* style of design and construction. DK17 is poised on a narrow shelf that rises

[4] The geographic coordinates given in this report are uncalibrated GPS values. These measurements were made without the benefit of a base station that could furnish absolute readings.

[5] This archaeological site and many others found in Upper Tibet are the subject of study in a two volume work entitled *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung*. It is being prepared for online publication by staff at the University of Virginia under auspices of the Tibetan & Himalayan Digital Library.

above the towering cliffs on the east side of the Lha Chu valley. This is the most spectacular of locations invested with a geomantic perfection that few other ruins at Mount Kailas can rival.

The existence of Lungten Phuk establishes that the southern flanks of the so-called Sri Ashtapad mountains were indeed selected for permanent habitation by the early Bonpo of Zhang Zhung.[6] Moreover, the east side of the so-called greater Sri Ashtapad mountain is where the Sheldra (Tib. = Shel-'dra) site is located.[7] The all-stone corbelled structures of Sheldra occupy deep fissures that run horizontally across a large escarpment. Lungten Phuk and Sheldra represent the same Zhang Zhung cultural grouping. No Jain cultural materials have come to light at these archaeological sites.

2) Serdung Chusum

By marching up the Serlung valley it is possible to reach the very base of the Mount Kailas massif. This is the most inner aspect of the holy precinct, the place where devotees can touch the very fabric of the holy mountain. Sheltered in a narrow fissure in the lower portion of the massif is a line of 13 stupas belonging to the Drigung Kagyu subsect. This highly revered site is known as Serdung Chusum (Tib. = gSer-gdung bcu-gsum).

The reliquary shrines of Serdung Chusum once contained the holy relics of Dringungpa hierarchs, but these sacred receptacles were desecrated in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The Bonpo maintain that the 13 stupas of Serdung Chusum once belonged to them. When the Bonpo were ousted from Mount Kailas with the formation of the Guge-Purang kingdom in the 10th and 11th centuries CE, all their holy sites were requisitioned by the Buddhists. Serdung Chusum (also known as the 'neck of Mount Kailas') is apparently where the Bonpo concealed scriptures during various waves of persecution, but this cannot be positively confirmed.

No residential ruins of any kind were found at Serdung Chusum. At 5800 m above sea level, this site falls well outside the zone in which human beings can comfortably inhabit. It is extremely cold and the air very thin at this elevation. Even the inhabitants of Zhang Zhung, who were eminently well adapted to their highland environment, did not establish their *dokhang* at such a high elevation.

There are bas relief carvings of prayers and deities and sculpted clay votive plaques at Serdung Chusum as well as at other sites around Mount Tise. These are well-known Buddhist religious emblems and should not be confused with Jain cultural materials.[8]

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[6] The term 'early Bonpo' refers to the followers of archaic religious traditions, rather than an institutionalized religion like that of today.

[7] For information on this site see John V. Bellezza, 2002. *Antiquities of Upper Tibet: An Inventory of Pre-Buddhist Archaeological Sites on the High Plateau*. Delhi: Adroit.

[8] It has come to my attention that certain Jains now believe that the main idol installed in the Choku monastery (Tib. Chos-sku) is actually one of theirs. This is certainly not the case. This stone representation of the Dharmakaya aspect of the Buddha is one of the most famous statues in all of western Tibet. It is one of 'three brothers' revered by the Tibetans for centuries. Many native folktales surround these 11th century CE idols. In the same vein, I understand that there are certain individuals who are artificially linking Jain Sanskrit terms with Bon terms rendered in the Zhang Zhung and Tibetan languages. One example will suffice to make my point: the Jain *taparishi* being related etymologically to Ta-pi hri-tsa, a Zhang Zhung saint of the 8th century CE. In order to establish such linguistic links one would first have to show that the extinct Zhang Zhung language was influenced by Indic languages such as Sanskrit. At this juncture in comparative linguistic research, this is far from certain.

The heads of the two branches of the Serlung valleys were at one time glaciated. This is proven by the existence of terminal moraines and other glacial features. As a result, there are no monumental remains in the valley bottoms, as these areas were once covered in thick ice or prone to flooding. The same barren aspect goes for Tsho Kavala and Tsho Kapala, two tiny glacial tarns nestled on top of a lateral moraine. Their location amid what was once a glacier, and their fierce climate, made them unfit for permanent human habitation. Due to the loss of ice, these bodies of water are on the verge of disappearing.

Ancient human habitation at Mount Nandi (divides the two branches of the Serlung Chu river) is represented by a lone *dokhang* discovered during KM-III at the southeastern foot of the mountain. This ruined all-stone corbelled residence measures 9.8 m x 8.5 m (31° 02.16′ N. lat. / 81° 18.24′ / 5330 m). It sits atop a narrow rocky shelf and is protected from the icy winds of the Kailas massif by Nandi. Its insulated geographic aspect permitted it to occupy a location further up valley than any other *dokhang* at Serlung.

There has been some speculation among Jains that the higher reaches of Mount Nandi (6000 m) may be some kind of gigantic ancient temple. This type of speculation can also be put to rest. The weird and wonderful shapes and forms of Mount Nandi were sculpted by nature, not the hand of humans. A close visual examination easily bears this out. As pointed out in an article entitled "Geological investigation of rock sculptures around Kailas Mountain", by Navin Juyal and P.S. Thakker, these formations were laid down during the Ecocene and Miocene eras, some 5 to 35 million years ago. Mount Kailas and Mount Nandi and other outliers were shaped by glacial action. The conglomerates that make up these mountains are too soft, irregular and crumbly for carving and massive building.

3) Gyangdrak

To the east of Serlung is the branch valley known as Gyangdrak. Above the Buddhist monastery of the same name is a large amphitheatre-shaped valley containing the carcasses of more than 30 *dokhang*. The high level of settlement in this sector reflects its status as a probable capital of Zhang Zhung. The Gyangdrak amphitheatre is an ideal location for the placement of an ancient settlement. It is well protected from harsh northern winds and it has a warm southern attitude. There are also permanent water sources at Gyangdrak, something not to take lightly in the arid conditions of western Tibet. Furthermore, stones for building the ancient all-stone residences are in ample supply in the area.

During the KM-III explorations, Ms. Walkerman and I discovered three more *dokhang* in the vicinity of Gyangdrak. The most interesting of these is situated at the highest elevation of any ancient residence at Mount Kailas, and for that matter, in all of Upper Tibet (31° 01.13 ‘ N. lat. / 81° 17.94′ E. long. / 5470 m). Only measuring 4 m x 7.5 m this highly deteriorated ancient residence (designated UW-XIX) was built on a rocky bench along the rim of the Gyangdrak amphitheatre. It is perched 70 or 80 m higher than the next highest *dokhang* in the area.

While combing the hillsides of Gyangdrak for any signs of Sri Ashtapad we reached a maximum elevation of 5580 m, more than 100 m higher than the highest *dokhang*. At this elevation exposure to the elements is extremely intense, as it is above the rim of the natural amphitheatre.

This elevation supports much less vegetation and the ground is far less stable than lower-lying areas. Because of these physical factors, and possibly physiological constraints as well, permanent human habitation did not take root above 5500 m anywhere in Upper Tibet.

4) Dharma King Norsang

East of the Gyangdrak amphitheatre there is a relatively long and narrow valley, which is accessible from Gyangdrak by traversing a series of steep slopes. At the head of this valley is an outlier called Dharma King Norsang (Tib. Chos-rgyal nor-bzang). During our reconnaissance, Ms. Walkerman and I reached a highpoint in the middle of the Dharma King Norsang valley (31° 01.09′ N. lat. / 81° 19.62′ E. long. / 5500 m). From our vantage point high above the valley we could survey rectangular summit structures, identified by Dr. Thakker on an earlier expedition as possible anthropogenic remains. These structures turned out to be natural rock formations. Other formations in the Dharma King Norsang valley proved just as unpromising.

Unlike places where archaeological traces are found, there are no local accounts of manmade remains in the Dharma King Norsang valley. According to the oral tradition of the native residents of Mount Kailas (known as Kangriwa), this valley was left undeveloped in ancient times. The lack of sites with cultural and historical value in the locale is reflected in the absence of walking trails and Tibetan religious monuments (such as stupas, cairns and *mani* walls). For reasons that are not entirely clear, the ancients ignored the Dharma King Norsang valley, founding their permanent residences in alternative locations. One factor may be that direct views of the Kailas massif are not available from here.

On the basis of an examination of rather low resolution satellite imagery it was also suggested by Dr. Thakker that a location among the glaciers of Dharma King Norsang could be a possible site of the Sri Ashtapad temple ruins. On KM-III this was deemed highly unlikely given the impossible nature of the terrain and climatic conditions. As noted, the ceiling of ancient permanent habitation at Mount Kailas and all of Upper Tibet is below 5500 m. The extremely high elevation and harsh conditions of the upper Dharma King Norsang valley are not and were not amenable to human colonization. This permanently frozen zone of moraines and ice is geologically unstable and practically devoid of vegetation. The climatic trend in the Late Holocene (4000 years before present to recent times) in Tibet has been to drier conditions. Glaciers have been generally receding, and this holds true for the Mount Kailas region, as the geological evidence demonstrates. In the past, the glaciers and ice fields of Mount Kailas were more extensive than they are today, rendering permanent settlement in the heads of the branch valleys impracticable.

5) Drira Phuk

After completing the reconnaissance of the inner circuit of Mount Kailas, four expedition members embarked on a round of the outer circuit. On several past expeditions, I surveyed Zhang Zhung ruins situated around the outer circuit near Choku, Dzutrul Phuk, Menla Phobrang and other locations. These sites are all composed of *dokhang*, the signature architectural form of ancient Upper Tibet.

On the KM-III expedition, as time was limited, it was decided that Ms. Walkerman and I would reconnoiter the area around Drira Phuk (Tib. = ’Bri-ra phug), something left undone on previous

expeditions, rather than revisit Zhang Zhung sites that were already surveyed. With the aid of local monks, we discovered the vestiges of an extensive *dokhang* settlement on the rocky slopes above the Buddhist monastery. In total, we located 16 such structures hidden among hollows and boulder fields. Scores of inhabitants must have occupied this site before 1000 CE, perhaps for many centuries. In the Bon tradition, Drira Phuk is connected to the theogony of the chief Zhang Zhung god, Gekhoe.

Conclusion

After the systematic exploration of the inner circuit of Mount Kailas, it can be stated that Sri Ashtapad, in the form of a Jain temple complex, does not exist there. The thorough survey of the outer circuit of Mount Kailas on multiple expeditions also leads me to conclude that no Sri Ashtapad temple exists on any flank of Mount Kailas.

Absolutely no physical evidence for the existence of Sri Ashtapad as a temple has been detected at Mount Kailas. Having systematically charted the Zhang Zhung ruins at Mount Kailas, I am keenly familiar with their morphological characteristics, and could eliminate them from our search. Yet, no alternative archaeological sites (save for Buddhist ones) could be discerned in the region. Sri Ashtapad, had it existed, might be represented in diverse structures and objects, as obscure as they may be. Its signature or footprint would be in the form of earthen mounds, rocky tumuli, platforms or other regular features, depressions, wall traces, the outwash of architectural debris, human burials, artifacts, etc. However, no such signs were detected during the KM-III Expedition or on earlier archaeological surveys of Mount Kailas.

The extremely thin and poorly developed alpine soils of Mount Kailas tend to keep archaeological remains on or near the surface. Zhang Zhung residential and ceremonial ruins, including tombs, are usually readily detectable on the surface. There is not an alluvium or other deep substrate to easily engulf ruins, as in lower climes. Of course, it is possible that landslides or other catastrophic geomorphologic changes obliterated certain archaeological assets, rendering visual detection impossible. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Zhang Zhung were skillful builders. They chose sites that would be protected from floods and avalanches, sites with a stable substrate and an amenable aspect. As a result, traces of them still exist today. Why would the ancient Jains chose lesser sites? They would not build on glacial moraines, flood plains and unstable slopes, locations that would imperil anything constructed upon them.

As the archaeological evidence demonstrates, building a temple above 5500 m, on Aeolian slopes and summits, was also not a viable alternative. Environmental conditions at these extreme elevations preclude any such construction. Not even the people of Zhang Zhung built at these heights, and none were better adapted to the high elevation environment than them.

The ancient inhabitable zone around Mount Kailas is between 4700 m and 5500 m, the highest homeland anywhere in the world (since circa 1000 CE, permanent settlement has been reduced to below 5100 m). Living and working at these heights requires special physiological adaptations and cultural innovations. The contemporary Tibetans are a case in point: their large lung capacity, relatively short extremities, hyper-oxygenated blood and other physiological adaptations make them superbly suited to living on the high plateau. Their traditional diet rich in

animal products, style of heavy dress and strong emotional bearing finely suit them to life at high elevation as well.

The ancient Jains, a lowland, tropical vegetarian people, would not have been as well acclimatized to the Mount Kailas environment as the indigenous peoples. This is not to say that individual Jain *munis* were not capable of great physical feats, they most certainly were, but as a group, the Jains were not physiologically well suited to living and working at Mount Kailas.

Temple building requires engineers, logisticians, cooks, artisans, and servants, most or all of which would have had to have been brought from the Subcontinent. They would not only have had to acclimatize but reach full productive strength, an unlikely prospect given the nature of the Tibetan environment. Many materials for the construction of a great Jain temple would have had to be transported up from the Indian Subcontinent, a logistical prospect.

Although I am not qualified to offer a textual analysis of Jain textual accounts of the Sri Ashtapad temple, I shall raise a few critical questions for consideration. The sheer size and opulence reputed to have characterized Sri Ashtapad do not seem in keeping with the physical constraints of the Mount Kailas area, an austere montane environment. Even a much more modest structure of traditional Jain architectural design seems incongruous with the physical setting of Mount Kailas. With its extreme cold and quite heavy snowfall, a temple with open plan architectural features designed for the tropical world would not be in keeping with local conditions. However, this is what is described in the texts. By contrast, the *dokhang* of Zhang Zhung were bunker-like affairs, set deeply into the ground with few windows or doors.

The lack of physical evidence for a Jain temple is compounded by the absence of a native Tibetan tradition for its foundation. Archaeological sites around Mount Kailas are known to a small handful of native elders at the holy mountain. These sites all belong to the Zhang Zhung cultural horizon and contain nothing palpably Jain or Indic in cultural orientation. Moreover, while Jains (known as *gcer-bu*) are noted in the philosophical treatises of the Bonpo (and Tibetan Buddhists), they are not mentioned historical narratives. In other words, there are not tales of the Jains and ancient residents of Mount Kailas and Zhang Zhung meeting and interacting. This does not mean that such encounters did not occur, but that they are not central to the Bon historical dialogue.

Mount Kailas was a Zhang Zhung stronghold, supposedly, even its first capital. Any visitation by ancient Jains would have had to be approved by the warlike inhabitants of the region. Even if the two groups became friends, it does not seem likely that the Zhang Zhung inhabitants would have countenanced the construction of an alien temple amid one of their most important political sites.

There has also been some speculation that Sri Ashtapad was founded before the rise of the Zhang Zhung cultural horizon circa 1000 BCE. Prior to this period, as in Kashmir or Swat, the inhabitants of western Tibet appear to have lived a Neolithic or New Stone Age existence, rearing livestock, farming in certain places and hunting. There appears to have been little scope for the establishment of Bronze Age temple complexes prior to 1000 BCE in Upper Tibet, but I hasten to add that this remains to be proven. Still, this begs the question: whatever its potential

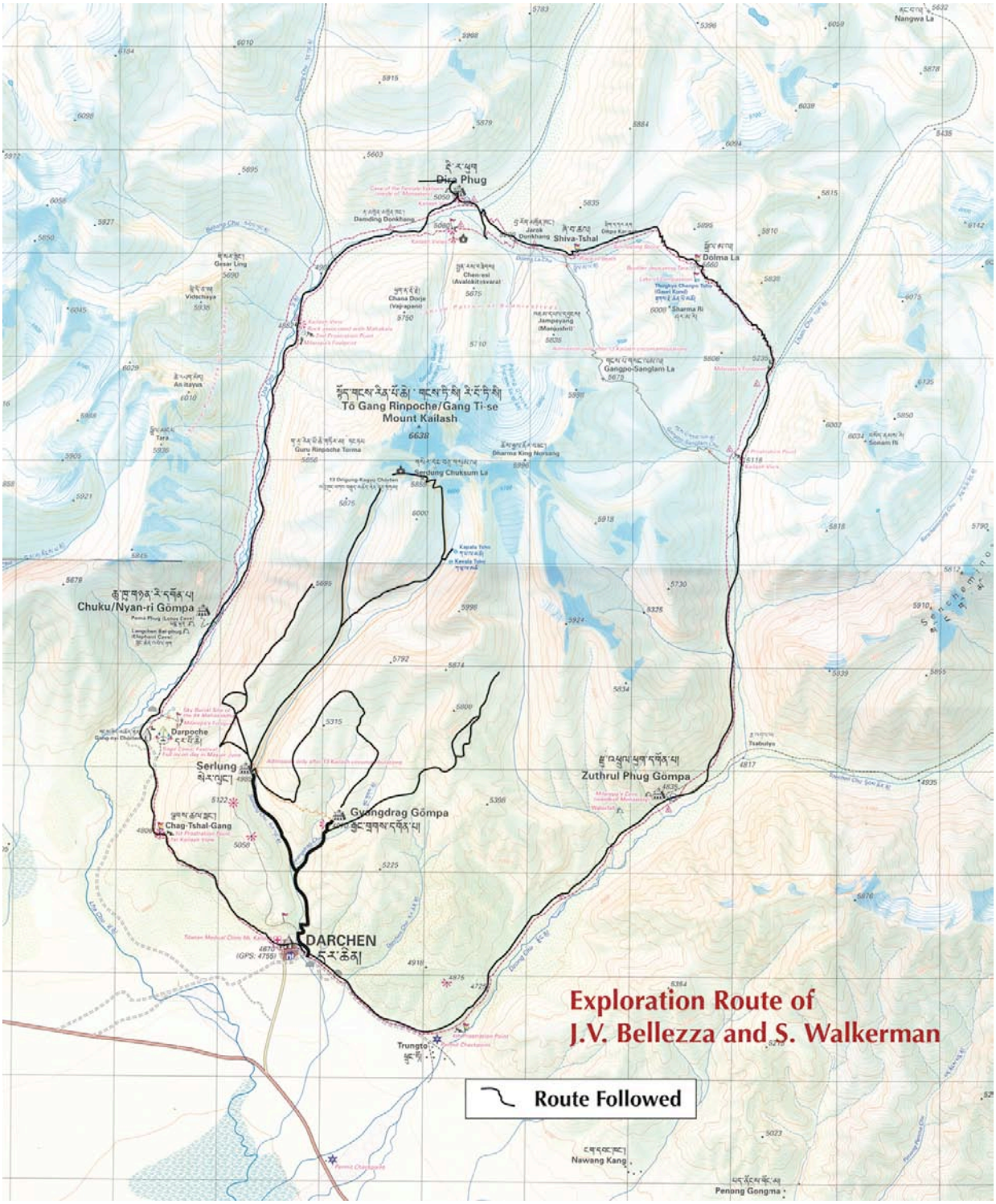
age, the remains of Sri Ashtapad, if they exist, should be detectable in the poorly developed soils of Mount Kailas.

As for the foundation of a Jain temple in remote antiquity, 5000 or more years ago, this is highly improbable. Intricately constructed temples, like the ones built by Jains in India in the first millennium CE, were not conceived of in the Neolithic. They are also not characteristic of the Bronze Age and Iron Age archaeological records.

Relying on his vast knowledge of Bon scriptures, Lopon Tenzin Namdak, the foremost Bon scholar of our time, has stated categorically that the Jains did not and could not have built a temple at Mount Kailas in ancient times. Examining the archaeological, cultural and environmental evidence as set out above, I can only reach the same conclusion. As for its possible existence somewhere else in western Tibet, this also seems unlikely. During my comprehensive survey of Zhang Zhung archaeological sites in the greater region (a 12-year project) no such evidence for a Sri Ashtapad temple were discerned.

Given the findings set forth in this report, Sri Ashtapad being Mount Kailas itself seems the most likely prospect. If that is the case, then, Sri Ashtapad is a metaphorical temple, an ageless mass of rock and ice, perfect in every way. As Mount Kailas, Sri Ashtapad is the temple par excellence of the Jains, a grand symbol of their noble dharma, the balm of humanity.

Maps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Chuku/Nyan-ri Gompa
Darpoche
Serlung
Chag-Tshal-Gang
Gyangdrag Gompa
Zuthrul Phug Gompa
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J.V. Bellezza and S. Walkerman
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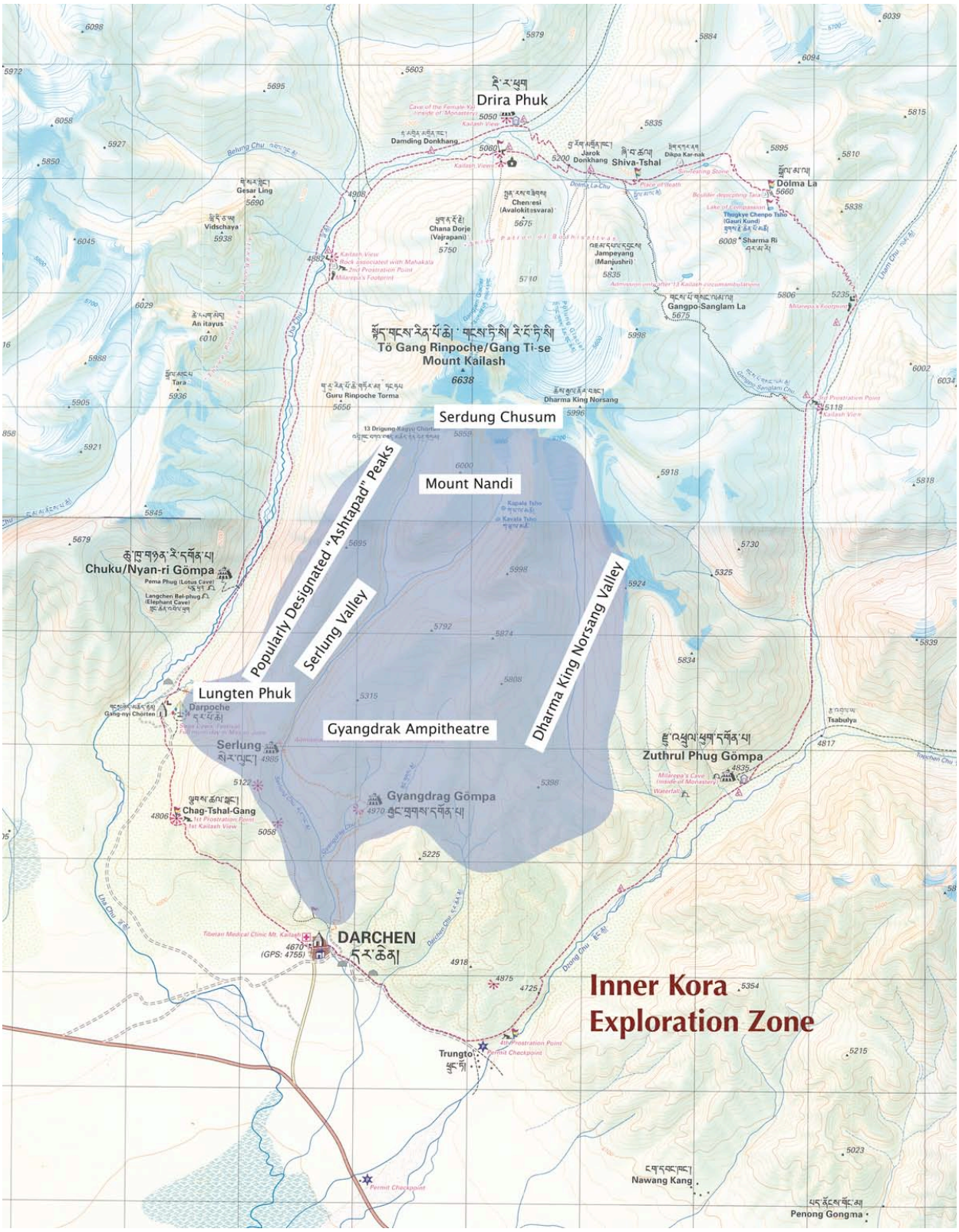
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Serdung Chusum
Mount Nandi
"Popularly Designated "Ashtapad" Peaks
Serlung Valley
Dharma King Norsang Valley
Chuku/Nyan-ri Gömpa
Pema Phug (Lotus Cave)
Langchen Bel-phug
(Elephant Cave)
Lungten Phuk
Darpoche
Gang-nyi Chörten
Gyangdrak Ampitheatre
Serlung
5122
Gyangdrag Gömpa
4970
Chag-Tshal-Gang
4806
5058
Zuthrul Phug Gömpa
4835
Tsabulya
4817
DARCHEN
4670
(GPS: 4755)
4918
4875
4725
Inner Kora
Exploration Zone
Trungto
Permit Checkpoint
Nawang Kang
Penong Gongma
5354
5215
5023