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Standing Guard over Gulmit

Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro on the importance of preserving the historic Ondra fort



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View of the Hunza River from Ondra fort

The culture and history of Gojal valley always fascinates me. In fact, I have written several articles on the history, heritage and culture of that valley: the information from my articles has been shared on several websites

without acknowledgment. I also wrote on Ondra fort earlier but it was a brief note about the fort – which once again was widely disseminated without credit.

Gojal valley is host to a number of historical monuments located at each of its villages – a few of which are just crying out for renovation and waiting to be promoted as tourist sites. Gulmit, the main town in the Gojal valley is dotted with wooden mosques, maktabas (religious schools) shrines and fortresses.

Speaking of fortresses, there are many in Gojal valley: namely Qalanderchi fort in Misghar valley, Rashit fortress in Chiporsun valley etc. However, the Ondra fort is more prominent than the others. This fort is perched on Ondra hill overlooking Gulmit and Ghulkin villages.



Ondra fort and hills of Gulmit

There are many contradictory dates about the construction of the fort which are based on the oral traditions prevalent among the Wakhi community of Gulmit. It is not known who the ruler of Hunza was when the fort was built. It is also difficult to reach any conclusions regarding the rule and arrival of Qutlugh Beg into Gulmit: as to whether he invaded Gulmit from Hunza or came all the way from Wakhan. These are some of the important

questions that need to be investigated. Local people believe that he was the first Wakhi ruler who established his rule in Gulmit, threatening the Mirs of Hunza. This, again, is a claim that needs to be corroborated with written records which are hard to find with reference to Qutlugh Beg's reign and his probable construction of fort. Local people believe that before him, Gulmit was under the control of the Mir of Hunza, whose name is not known to many of the oral historians of Gulmit and other Wakhi villages. A few who name Azhur Jamshid as the ruler of Gilgit under whose dominion Hunza lay, and that he lived many centuries before Qutlugh Beg.

According to oral historians whom I interviewed, the territory of Qutlugh Beg started from Khyber village and ended at Chaman Gul. In order to secure his territory from invaders, he built two gates, one at Khyber village and the other at Chaman Gul village, which were closed at night and opened in the day. In times of war, these were firmly closed: thus keeping enemies away from his realm. The remains of the both gates and fortification walls can still be seen at Khyber and Chaman Gul villages.

In order to rein in the probable advance of enemies from north and south, he built the Ondra fort. To the north lay the State of Hunza, and to south the Kyrgyz invaders who used to attack Gulmit so as to obtain control of the pastures for their livestock.



Remains of the northern rampart of Ondra fort

The height of the ramparts of the fort ranges from 6 to 13 feet above the ground. There were many living quarters inside the fort. One can find the living quarters at two places: one on southern side and the other on the northern side. These living quarters are separated by the central wall of the fort that runs east to west. The central rampart is higher than the southern and northern fortification walls.

The northern and southern quarters were positioned so as to provide the garrison with a vantage point to watch enemies coming in from either of these two directions.

The fortification walls had embrasures and merlons. More specifically, the embrasures are to be found only on the northern and southern walls – these two being the most threatened approaches to the fort as already mentioned. All the ramparts of the fort are still in good condition. However, the eastern and western fortification walls are crumbling.

Looking at the present ramparts of the fort, one can argue that these walls may have been constructed in the 16th century. The fort itself seems to have been much older than the 16th century. It is likely that Qutluqh Beg may have reconstructed the fort in the 16th or 17th century, which reflects his power as a Wakhi ruler. He was famous for his gallantry and skill as a swordsman on the field of battle.

Qutluqh Beg was poisoned to death by one of his elderly female servants. She had been sent by the then Mir of Hunza and mixed poison into the food of Qutluqh Beg and his courtesans.

After the death of Qutluqh Beg, Gulmit was recaptured and Ondra fell into hands of a Mir of Hunza.

Qutluqh Beg was buried in Gulmit along with his courtesans. According to Afzal Khan, a notable of Gulmit, the grave of Qutluqh Beg was located where there is now the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Gulmit. It is believed that Qutluqh Beg ruled over Gulmit and nearby areas for twelve years. During his rule, it appears that land and life were safe and secure. He pushed the advancing Kyrgyz back to their lands, putting an end to any designs that they might have for conquest of this region.

Heroic stories of Qutluqh Beg still dominate the daily discourse of Wakhi people living in Gulmit, Shimshal (a phonetic variation of Singh Shal) and Chiporsan valleys of Gojal.

From Ondra fort, one can have a panoramic view of Gulmit. From the south one can see Gulmit as far as Shishkat village and Attabad Lake. And from the north one can view Ghulkin village. Also, from the north, one can see Ghulkin glacier, the Passu cones and Qaroon peak. From the west, there are amazing views of Gulmit glacier, Gulmit Tower, Shisper peak and Utlar Sar. And from the east there is a spectacular view of the Hunza River.

Keeping in view the tourist potential of the Ondra fort, the concerned authorities should save the fort from further destruction. Not many tourists visit this fort as they literally know nothing about it. The concerned department in Gilgit-Baltistan should guide tourists about Ondra fort's importance and heritage value – especially those who intend to visit Attabad Lake.

Perhaps the Aga Khan Cultural Service Pakistan (AKCSP) could make concerted efforts in this regard to save and preserve the Ondra fort. After all, they have preserved many historic buildings of Gilgit-Baltistan. The preservation of the Baltit and Altit forts, conservation of Ganish Khun, the Matktab in Ghulkin, the old house in Sost in Gojal valley and many other monuments in Baltistan go to AKCSP's credit.

Once the Ondra fort is restored to its past glory, a museum could be built there to display Wakhi art and culture.

The author is an anthropologist and has authored four books: 'Symbols in Stone: The Rock Art of Sindh', 'Perspectives on the art and architecture of Sindh', 'Memorial Stones: Tharparkar' and 'Archaeology, Religion and Art in Sindh'. He may be contacted at: zulfi04@hotmail.com