

## Is There a Network of Sacred Fires Across the Himalayas and Central Asia? From Baku to Nepal, and Back

The worship of the “everlasting fire” emanating from natural gas is of special interest for the study of the relationship between the Himalayas and Central Asia. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at least, and until the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this worship connected the Hindu world to the gates of Europe, through Indian or Hindu pilgrims crossing the whole of Central Asia, on their way to Baku, in Azerbaijan, to worship the “Great Flame,” as they called the natural gas burning there. Travellers and scholars who met these devotees noted that they considered the Great Flame of Baku as the magnified counterpart of another flame burning in the Himalayan range, in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, India. They also noted that some of these pilgrims connected the two flames by their peregrination from one flame to the other; however, the reason for this unbelievably long pilgrimage was unknown.

In this paper, I will focus on the rituals and myths related to each of these two sanctuaries. I will also explore the characteristics of two other natural flames worshiped further east in the Himalayan range, at Dullu in Dailekh district, and at Muktinath in Mustang district, western Nepal, in order to show their various connections. The ancient depictions of fire worship in Baku represent our starting point, from which we will argue that it included several practices incompatible with the Zoroastrian religion,<sup>1</sup> and that there are more common features between the sites of Baku and Dullu than between the Great

and the Small Flames, whose pairing is well-known. The four sacred sites included in our study may even be considered as forming a gigantic fire network joining the central Himalayas to Europe, across Central Asia. Numerous traders and adventurers travelled along the area covered by this network, especially the region that was once part of Persia. Starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some of them related their experiences, bringing precious testimonies to document the practices associated with the worship of the “Eternal Fire”.

### THE FIRE OF BAKU

Jean Chardin, who stayed in Persia between 1665 and 1680, reported that the most sacred centre for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Persian fire worshippers was located in Azerbaijan: “The Persians say that this province is called Azerbeyan, that is to say, fire country, because the most famous Fire Temple *was* built there, that it *kept* a fire that Fire worshippers believed God, and that the great priest of this religion *resided* there. Guebres [...] provide as a constant truth that the fire *is still there*, that it *looks* like an underground mineral fire [...] they add another feature, which is a good joke, that making a hole in the ground everything and putting a pot above, the fire boils and cooks everything in it.”<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that Chardin used both the past and the

<sup>1</sup> This argument had already been fully developed by A.V. Jackson (1911: 40–57), who, however, did not exclude the presence of Zoroastrian devotees “in the background”. This last point does not seem founded in the light of the rituals performed in the Baku “Burning Field”. Jackson quoted several ancient references on the Baku Fire which are not mentioned here for reasons of space.

<sup>2</sup> “Les Persans disent que cette province a été appelée *Azer-beyan*; c’est-à-dire lieu de feu, ou *païs de feu*; à cause que le plus celebre Temple du feu y étoit bâti; qu’on y gardoit un feu que les *Ignicoles* croyoient Dieu: et que le grand Pontife de cette Religion y résidoit. Les *Guebres* [...] assurent, comme une vérité constante, que le feu sacré y est encore; qu’il ressemble au feu mineral et souterrain [...] Ils ajoutent une autre particularité, qui est une bonne plaisanterie,

present tenses,<sup>3</sup> suggesting that his informants distinguished a previous cult from the present persistence of the fire. Yet, his indication of an old Zoroastrian temple in Baku should be treated with caution, considering that this newly discovered religion was very much in vogue in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Named Guebres, Gebrs, or Mages, the Persian fire worshippers exerted a real fascination at the time: they were said to be at the origin of the fire cult in ancient Greece and Rome, and to have then been strongly opposed by Islam, forcing them to flee to India, where fire worship has long been regarded as one of the most respectable institutions. But in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Persia, "Guebres" were in fact still numerous, as evidenced, among others, by Chardin, who described them as a highly recognisable group, with specific clothes, manners and appearance.<sup>4</sup> We will see that despite their massive presence they were not involved in the worship of the Baku "Everlasting Fire" in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Chardin's informant(s)' claim regarding the persistence of the fire, and its use for cooking that the French trader thought was a joke, was confirmed by the first travellers who visited the site, starting with E. Kämpfer's record of 1683.

#### *The First Accounts of the "Eternal Fire" of Baku*

At the time of his visit in 1683, E. Kämpfer, a German doctor, saw an astonishing "piece of land that was on fire", where "flames, wonderful to behold, issued from the numerous cracks" and "filled the onlookers with dread". There, some individuals were busy cooking food, while others were burning lime, and two Indian devotees were worshipping the fire (Kämpfer 1712: 273–74). The passage referring to the latter, originally in Latin, was translated as: "Two Indian fire-worshippers, strangers from the tribe of the Parsees, were sitting quietly within a semi-circular wall which they had built, absorbed in watching and worshipping the fire that was leaping forth, and through which they adored the eternal divinity" (Forbes 1958: 157).

Though there is an ambiguity in the original text about the nature of the enclosure where the sacred fire was located,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that

there was no closed building, or fire temple, at the time of Kämpfer's visit, but this did not prevent fire worship taking place. Yet rather than by Persian fire worshippers, who were still numerous in Persia at the time, the worship was performed by Indians. Kämpfer qualified them as "descendants of the old Persians", but did not say that they worshiped "the eternal divinity" *through* the fire, as if the divinity were external to the fire, but simply that they worshiped an eternal deity when worshipping the fire. There is thus an obvious assimilation to Zoroastrianism by the translator, and even, I would argue, by E. Kämpfer himself who could probably not imagine Hindu worshipers so far from their usual area and in the land of the Guebres! Indeed, the next visitor, Johann Lerche, depicted these Indian worshipers, and in spite of his assertion that they were "Ancient Persians", clearly portrayed Hindu ascetics: "Many of them have braids reaching the ground, while others tie them on their head. They wear wooden necklaces coloured in red around the neck. Their hair is dirty and uncombed. Their forehead is smeared, from top to nose, with a yellow mark, made of fresh cow-dung and saffron, as all Indians also do." (Lerche 1791: 63).<sup>6</sup>

According to Lerche (1791: 60), first, a small house, and then, around 1715, a two-storey, L-shaped house was built near the fire. In 1734, when he visited the "Eternal Fire", this house had six rooms, in which twelve "Guebres" lived. As for the sacred fire, it was then burning in a huge pit, approximately 34 metres long and 2.70 metres deep: "It does not burn everywhere in the pit in the same manner. The tallest flames are not higher than 5.4 metres.<sup>7</sup> In some places, it does not burn at all, or not in permanence." (Lerche 1791: 60) "Walking away, I found other numerous pits, but smaller, in which fire was burning" (Lerche 1791: 81).

#### *From the Burning Field to the Fire Temple*

The landscape depicted by Lerche evokes the burning field (*ager ardens*) that Kämpfer saw, except for the huge pit where the fire was worshiped, which may have formed itself between the two visits.

savoir qu'en faisant un trou en terre, et mettant une marmite dessus, ce feu la fait bouillir, et cuit tout ce qui est dedans." (Chardin 1811, vol. II: 286).

<sup>3</sup> See the passages which I have highlighted in italics.

<sup>4</sup> Chardin (1811 II: 355–58). Chardin is of the opinion that the distinctive features of the Fire worshippers in 17<sup>th</sup> century-Persia could be a consequence of their subjection and poverty rather than pointing at a different population.

<sup>5</sup> The passage referring to the Indian worshippers, reads: " (...) gemini ex veterum Persarum progenie hospites indi ignicolae, circa structam à se maceriam otiosi sedebant, aspectu ac veneratione erumpentis flammae, litantes aeterna numina" (Kämpfer 1712: 273–74). It can be translated as: "A pair of Indian fire-

worshippers, guests/foreigners (*hospites*) from the descendants of the old Persians, were sitting calmly around the wall/enclosure which they had built themselves, watching and worshipping the erupting flame, making an offering to the eternal deity" (translation by John Whelpton, whom I thank for his help). Yet the fire worshippers are depicted as sitting *within* a semi-circular wall in the engraving placed above the city of "Backu" on p. 268–69 of Kämpfer's account.

<sup>6</sup> In later descriptions of these ascetics, such as the one by the "Russian traveller" published in 1833 (Anonymous 1833: 360), they are said to wear a whistle around their necks and earrings, which are two distinctive features of the Nath.

<sup>7</sup> The unit in the original text is the "klaster" = approx. 6 feet.

Some years later, Dr Mounsey described a caravanserai in poor condition where “twelve Indian priests, and other devotees” lived, and worshiped the fire. Mounsey depicted the fire burning in the cracks of the walls and from the ground of their cells, enabling the “dervishes” to cook food, but he made no mention of a temple or altar (Mounsey 1748). Yet in the description by Jonas Hanway dating from the same year, 1747, there is mention of 40 to 50 devotees worshipping the fire in a place where: “There are several ancient temples built with stone”. Apparently none of them sheltered a flame, which issued outside one of them, from the top of a large, three-foot high hollow cane (Hanway 1753: 381). But the number of temples described by Hanway was contested by John Cook, who had visited the place a little before him, in 1746, and had only seen a “small square dike, built with stones”, “one poor room” and another one “where the votaries lived, the number of whom at that time did not exceed forty”. In this room “was a place apart”. “In this, being pure sand, were placed a few hollow reeds: one by way of pre-eminence was in the middle, and larger than the rest, to which other reeds were closely joined, so as to form three openings at the top, out of which issued three pale blue flames.” (Cook 1770: 382). It appears from this last testimony that the fire temple observed by the subsequent visitors, and which still stands there today, does not date from 1745, as claimed by Justin Abbott (1908: 303), who translated its inscriptions, but probably from 1747. The gas was then channelled in pipes, notably on the roof of the fire temple, illuminating the whole courtyard, and after the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was no longer question of a whole area with fires burning from small volcanoes or cracks in the ground.<sup>8</sup>

The number of Indian devotees at the fire temple did not grow over time, twelve being quoted in most depictions of the place. And less than two centuries after the first documented visits, the worship was already on the decline. In 1840, the “great priest”, still heading a group of twelve “Guebres”, complained to the Comte de Suzannet (1841: 81) that there had been no visit for the past three years. Wor-

ship came to an end three decades later, during the late 1870s, as attested by Colonel Stewart (1897: 311), who met: “one Hindu priest alone” to minister the sacred fire during his first visit in 1866, and found: “the priest gone, the fire extinguished and the keys of the temple in the hands of the engineer of the refinery” in 1881, when he made his second visit.<sup>9</sup>

Several authors, among whom Williams Jackson (1911: 46–47), reviewed the mentions of this Eternal Fire and concluded that there was no reference to fire worship or fire temple in this area in Greek, Roman, early Armenian, and medieval Arab-Persian geographers’ texts; an absence which suggests that it is a Hindu cult, held by ascetics from northern India rather than an old Zoroastrian shrine revived by Hindu ascetics. Yet fire worship was so strongly associated with Zoroastrianism that, for instance, when Lord Viscount Royston asked a devotee of the Baku Fire what was his country, and received the answer “I am an Hindoo”, he commented in brackets: “(I presume a Parsee, from the frontiers of India)” (Rev. H. 1838: 579).

#### *The Incorruptible Nature of the Fire in Baku*

Travellers who visited Baku when the cult was alive mostly paid attention to the properties of the flames and to the substance then called naphtha, to the detriment of religious beliefs and practices. The best description of the rituals is by the Comte de Suzannet (1841: 79–81), but among the particularities that are worth mentioning here for our purpose are the various uses of the fire, including lighting, heating and cooking, which was already mentioned to Chardin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These profane uses do not support the thesis of a Zoroastrian cult or even of Zoroastrian elements at the time, given the precautions of the followers of this religion regarding the purity of the fire they worship.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the fire worshippers in Baku cooked their food on the very same fire they worshipped is reported in many accounts, such as one by a Russian traveller: “They prepare their food in the same corner of their cell where they do their prayers, and on

<sup>8</sup> De Suzannet’s precise description dating from his visit in 1840 reads: “Le monastère a cinq cents pieds de tour, et les murs s’élèvent à une hauteur de dix-neuf pieds; au milieu de la cour est un clocher carré. On entre dans l’intérieur du clocher par l’espace compris entre les colonnes qui le soutiennent. Dans les quatre angles sont placés des tuyaux, communiquant par des conduits souterrains avec les sources de naphthe. Ces tuyaux s’élèvent à trente-six pieds de haut, et vomissent de fortes colonnes de flamme.” (1841: 79). (The monastery is five hundred feet in circumference, and the walls rise to a height of nineteen feet; in the middle of the courtyard is a square bell tower. One enters the interior of the tower by the space between the columns that support it. In the four corners are placed pipes, communicating through underground conduits with the sources of naphtha. These pipes are thirty-six feet high, and vomit strong columns of flame).

<sup>9</sup> When Jules Patenôtre (1874: 534) visited the Fire temple in 1874, there was still one priest, alone, “recently arrived from Lahore”. This testimony, combined with Stewart’s observations, allows dating the end of the Fire worship to the years 1875–1880.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Lord Viscount Royston, who presumed that the Hindu devotees of the Baku Fire were in fact “Parsees” made the following observation, probably born from his own pre-conception, as it is contradicted by all other observers: “I observed a great pile of fuel, for they esteem the other fire too pure for culinary purposes”. Rev. H. (1838: 579).

the same fire" (Anonymous 1833: 365),<sup>11</sup> or Don Juan Van Halen's narrative: "Notwithstanding their fanaticism, they [the Guebres] do not hesitate in cooking their victuals by that fire".<sup>12</sup> Some visitors saw a pit to burn the dead, or the dead ascetics only, next to the fire temple, which is a still more impure use of the sacred fire.<sup>13</sup> The anonymous Russian traveller quoted above, described a very clean small cave (*caveau*), in which the dead bodies of Hindus were placed, anointed with butter and burnt in the gas emanating in the cave. Once the cremation was over, the dead's ashes were collected and thrown into the wind (Anonymous 1833: 365).

#### *The Myth of Origin of the Fire in Baku*

Apart from its claimed antiquity and its everlasting character, already stated by Chardin, and repeatedly reaffirmed after him, for instance by Hanway (1753: 381), who wrote that the devotees "affirm that this flame has continued ever since the flood, and they believe it will last to the end of the world", there is only one myth of origin of the Baku fire to be found in the literature. In 1734, Lerche was able to talk to one of the "Guebres", aged 80, who spoke some Russian. He told him the following story: "More than a thousand years ago, the Devil (*Teufel*) tormented men so much that God (*Gott*) agreed to throw him in the abysses and to put on him a fire, which was constantly fed by the grease of the Devil, who was very tall and fat. In order that he could not manage to come out using his great cunning, we were ordered to watch here, and to pray at this fire days and nights without interruption." (Lerche 1791: 61).

Fredericke de Freygang (1816: 161) quotes the same story, without reference to Lerche. The flames, she writes in a letter written in 1812, were created when Satan, a giant and fat being, was thrown into a huge hole. The fire is burning from the fat of his body and care

should be taken of the flame, so that Satan does not come up back again. The same legend is later reported by some other authors, but given the lack of any additional or different element, they have probably borrowed their information from Lerche's account.<sup>14</sup>

#### *The Pilgrimage to Baku*

During the period from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when fire worship was both alive *and* documented, several travellers have mentioned their meeting in Central Asia with Indian pilgrims en route to or from Baku, such as Jacques Morier, on 4 October 1812, not far from the Araks River.<sup>15</sup> But the most detailed testimony of the existence of a pilgrimage route from India to Baku is provided by the story of their extraordinary journeys by two Indian "fakeers", collected in 1792 by Jonathan Duncan (1799). The first is by Praun Poori (or Pran Puri), a Kshatriya by birth, native from Kannauj, who became a Sannyasi ascetic in 1753 at the age of nine. After walking across South India and Ceylon, he went to Mumbai, passed through the Punjab, went further west to Kabul, Bamian, Ghazni, Herat and Astrabad, finally reaching what he calls the Maha or Buree Jowalla Mukhi, or Great Fire Mouth, near "Baki". There, he spent a total of eleven months, which is the longest of all the stays he mentioned. Afterwards he crossed the Caspian Sea, went to Moscow, and from there went back by a different route, passing through Isfahan, going back and forth between the Arabian Peninsula, Persia and India, again to Balkh, Bokhara, and Samarkand. Then, walking along the Himalayan range, he went to Kashmir, Gangotri, Nepal (Kathmandu and Gosainthan), and finally reached Tibet (where he went first to Lhasa, then to Lake Manasarovar). Given the details of his journey, one can estimate that Pran Puri stayed in Baku in the 1760s. His narrative confirms that the Great Fire was a place of pilgrimage for 18<sup>th</sup>-century Indian ascetics, not a religious place where neighbouring Indian merchants would settle for penance, which could have been the case given the presence of numerous Indian merchants

<sup>11</sup> His narrative is later than 1826, a date mentioned in the text, and before 1833, date of its publication.

<sup>12</sup> A fire which the author has just presented before this observation as issued from Satan's body (Van Halen 1827: 364). On the use of the sacred fire for cooking, see also G. Forster (1798: 229).

<sup>13</sup> George Forster (1798: 229) speaks of many "volcanoes" outside the walls of the Fire Temple, one of which "adapted by the Hindoos to the uses of a funeral pile". The Comte de Suzannet (1849: 79) writes: "Un autre conduit placé dans une des cellules lance aussi de vives flammes. Devant ce conduit est placé l'autel où les adorateurs du feu célèbrent les cérémonies de leur religion. C'est sur cet autel que sont brûlés les corps des vrais croyants." (Another pipe placed in one of the cells also emits bright flames. In front of this pipe the altar where the fire worshippers celebrate the ceremonies of their religion is placed. *It is on this altar that the bodies of the true believers are cremated*).

<sup>14</sup> At any rate it is the case of Freygang's account of Baku, which is a mere translation of Lerche.

<sup>15</sup> J. Morier (1818: 243): "Travelling onwards, we met an Indian entirely alone, on foot, with no other weapon than a stick, who was on his road to Benares returning from his pilgrimage to Baku".

Two decades earlier, G. Forster (1798: 233) wrote: "the Atashghah at Baku, where a Hindoo is found so deeply tinctured with the enthusiasm of religion, that though his nerves be constitutionally of a tender texture and his frame relaxed by age, he will journey through hostile regions from the Ganges to the Volga, to offer up prayer at the shrine of his God".



in the region.<sup>16</sup> The narrative of the second “fakeer” published by J. Duncan also leads him to a large flame, but seemingly located in the Himalayas, and it is probably the one near Kangra, in Himachal Pradesh, which is also a famous place of pilgrimage.

A more complete depiction of Pran’s travel was published in 1810, and indicates that he also went to (Kangra’s) Jwalamukhi before heading to Baku and that he continued his travel through Central Asia with sixteen other ascetics he met on his way. This detailed account also makes it clear that the Great Flame of Baku was the goal of Pran’s pilgrimage, at least from Afghanistan onward, as he reported telling King Ahmed Shah, near Gazni: “I come from Hindostan, and am going to visit the great JWALA” (Anonymous/Duncan? 1810: 271). Pran’s description of the Great Fire differs radically from any other available depiction, in that he enumerates twelve places sacred for the Hindus in a wide area “within the circumference of twenty-four miles” (Anonymous/Duncan? 1810: 342). The list reads: “1st, A large Bhavan, or mansion, from which Bhim-sena took up the flame, and placed it in a wooden house. This Bhavan is now empty. 2nd, Mungla Bhavan. 3rd, Jungla Bhavan. 4th, Haanoman Bhavan, in which the body of every Hindoo who dies at this place is burnt. 5th, Phoolwari Bhavan, whence thousands of flames rise. 6th, Rut curri-mahi-ca Bhavan, where any one desirous of baking bread puts the dough into this place, and it is baked without fuel. 7th, Bhairavas Bhavan. This is a great place of worship. 8th, Calis Bhavan: also a considerable place. 9th, Chaitras Bhavan. 10th Balas Bhavan. 11th Tirpura Bhavan. 12th, Sundari Bhavan.” (Anonymous/Duncan? 1810: 342).

This list introduces the giant Pandava brother Bhimsen as an actor, not in the creation but in the displacement of the flame. It also attests to the presence of several Hindu gods worshiped in the area: Bhairava, Kali, the tantric deities Bala and Tripura Sundari. As for Mangla and Jangla, their names literally mean Auspicious and Wild. The Phulbari, or Flower Garden, where rise thousands of flames may correspond to the huge pit described by Lerche. The sixth place, the “Mansion of Bread Sauce” is a cooking place, but its inclusion in the list of the sacred places suggests that cooking in this context had a religious dimension. Finally, the depiction of the fourth place confirms that cremation using the Baku Fire concerned all Hindus dying there, including ascetics.

<sup>16</sup> The presence in Baku of a community of Hindu traders is mentioned by G. Forster (1808 [1st ed. 1798], vol. II, p. 456). “A society of Moultan Hindoos, which has long been established in Baku, contributes largely to the circulation of its commerce; and with the Armenians they may be accounted the principal merchants of Shirwan.”

### *The Distant Great and Small Flames*

Like Pran Puri, numerous Indian pilgrims were reported as travelling from one to the other of the two sacred flames of Baku and Kangra. Colonel Stewart (1897: 311 fn. 34) who met at the fire temple of Baku, pilgrims coming from the Kangra’s fire temple in Himachal Pradesh, even wrote: “Hindu visitors come there after having visited the temple of Jawala Mukhi [Fire Mouth] of the district of Kangra”, as if it were a rule. As a matter of fact, the two flames of Kangra and of Baku were connected in common parlance, as noted by Sir J.J. Modi (1926), who wrote a reciprocal statement about Kangra: “Talking to the Hindus there, they call this Small Jwaalaajee [Small Flame] and stated that *their* Big Jwaalaajee [*their* Big Flame] is in Baku, Azerbaizaan.”<sup>17</sup>

The small and big flames were therefore not only connected by what appears to be one of the longest pilgrimage route ever known, several thousand kilometres long, along mountainous paths, but were also paired Jwalaji, Venerable Flames, or Jwalamukhi, Fire Mouths.<sup>18</sup> But the exact nature of the relationship between these two distant shrines is unknown.

### JWALAMUKHI OF KANGRA

The various profane uses of the Everlasting Fire of Baku in spite of its sacredness, and the burning of dead using this fire, contrast with the elements found at the Small Jwalaji in Jwalamukhi, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh. Indeed, the flames are worshiped there with flowers and other pure offerings. In the same manner, their origin myth, related to the dismemberment of Sati’s body, is proper to the Indian sub-continent and differs from the story of the giant devil found in Baku. Yet, as we will show, behind these apparent divergences, other

<sup>17</sup> The possessive pronoun used to designate the Fire of Baku is notable. The full passage reads: “When I visited the Kangra Valley in the Himalaya Mountains some 25 years ago (1900 A. D.), I was told that the current Aatash Kadeh was considered as a Hindu Temple by the Hindu friends I met there. In the year 1900 A. D., I [...] visited the valleys of Kangra and Kulu [...] That time I heard that there is a village called Jwaalaajee where at one place natural gas emits from earth, night and day, and the Hindu worshippers throw clarified butter (Ghee) on it so that the fire lights up like a huge fire ball. I went there after hearing about it and saw the place of this burning substance (Jwaalaajee). Talking to the Hindus there, they call this Small Jwaalaajee and stated that their Big Jwaalaajee is in Baku, Aazerbaizaan.” (*My travels outside Bombay*, 1926, online ed.)

<sup>18</sup> Orthographies of both Jwala and Mukhi are varied. The latter is often found under the form “Muc’hi”. Wilford (1799: 395), for instance, spells it: “Juala-muc’hi”. In Nepali *jvālāmukhi* is commonly used to designate a volcano.

elements related to Kangra's Jwalamukhi, which are no longer practised, or which are peripheral, have similarities with Baku.

The Jwalamukhi temple of Kangra is referred to by Ferishta in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who reported that Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlak (who attacked Kangra in 1365) found a valuable collection of 1300 ancient Hindu works in the Jwalamukhi temple at Nagarkot (the ancient name of Kangra) and had one of them translated into Persian. Ferishta also mentioned the legend of Alexander's visit to the place, which would have been told to the sultan: "The people of Nagarkote told Feroze, that the idol which the Hindoos worshipped in the temple of Nagarkote was the image of Nowshaba, the wife of Alexander the Great, and that that conqueror left the idol with them. The name by which it was then known was Jwala-mookhi." (Ferishta 1829, vol. 1: 263). Ferishta added: "Some historians state, that Feroze, on this occasion, broke the idols of Nagarkote, and mixing the fragments with pieces of cow's flesh, filled bags with them, and caused them to be tied round the necks of Bramins, who were then paraded through the camp. It is said, also, that he sent the image of Nowshaba to Mecca to be thrown on the road" (Ferishta 1829, vol. 1: 263). Other legends describe Akbar or Aurangzeb as once having ordered the flames to be extinguished by diverting a small rivulet, then by shutting them under an iron umbrella, which is still in the temple. Gorakhnath is also said to have visited the place and Jwalamukhi is still very sacred to Nath yogis or ascetics who follow the path of Gorakhnath.<sup>19</sup>

Pilgrimage to Jwalamukhi in the Kangra district is reported for the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the tradition which states that Guru Angad used to lead a group of devotees from Khadur Sahib there (Amritsar district, Punjab) each year. He is said to have met Guru Nanak in 1532 on his way to Jwalamukhi, and became his disciple.<sup>20</sup>

Around 1590, Abu Fazl Allami (1997: 318–19) spoke of an "astounding crowd" at the domed Jwalamukhi temple built above "torch-like flames issu[ing] from the ground". He added: "There is a concourse of pilgrims and various things are cast into the flames with the expectation of obtaining temporal blessings", without more detail.

About one and a half centuries later, Joseph Tieffenthaler<sup>21</sup> saw devotees throwing sandalwood, rice, oil, butter, alcohol, almonds and

other things into the fire, which it reduced to ashes. The devotees then smeared these ashes on their eyes and foreheads. Tieffenthaler (1786: 108) added: "In the past, the superstitious people offered a head severed with a sickle to this idol which vomits flame, but this is rarely practiced today." The author did not qualify this head, suggesting that it could be human.

Charles Hügel, who visited Jwalamukhi in the 1830s, spoke of "a very large population, among whom a great proportion are Gosains, Bairagis, Yogis, Jats, and penitents of all sorts". But contrary to Baku, where they were cremated with the sacred fire, these "penitents" were buried in separate graves at Jwalamukhi, and Hügel stated: "an incredible number of these occupy almost every vacant space" (Hügel 1845: 42). He described the temple as follows: "[I]n the centre of the forecourt [of the fire temple] is hollowed out a pit, like our graves, having seats at either end, on which the Fakirs place themselves. A perpetual flame arises from this pit [...] and [...] from two [other] places" (Hügel 1845: 42). Pilgrims offered them flowers (*ibid.*: 44).

Today, apart from the flames, there are no statues or other representations in the temple of Jwalaji. Its fame has not decreased over time, and it is still a much frequented place of pilgrimage for people from all over India, especially during Navaratri, the goddess festival.

The origin of the "Venerable Flame" burning in the Jwalamukhi temple of Kangra is related to the myth of the dismemberment of Sati's body after her immolation in the sacrificial fire pit of her father Daksha. Shiva carried the corpse of his dead wife until it fell to earth in 51 different places in the Indian sub-continent, forming the same number of Shakti Pithas, or "seats of divine power". At Jwalamukhi, Sati's tongue would have fallen.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the evil being of Baku, in Kangra, it is thus a part of the goddess that is thought to burn while there are no flames in most of the sacred landing places where the other parts of her body are worshipped. But, another story, told to Hutchison in 1846, identifies Jwalamukhi as the mouth of another being, the giant demon Jalandhara, who is reminiscent of the Baku's devil. Jalandhara was born of the fire which issued from Shiva's third eye when Indra and Brihaspati provoked his anger by not recognising him. He was born invincible and Shiva had finally to bury Jalandhara to get rid of him. Jalandhara's body is said to lie underground from Jwalamukhi, where fire burns from his mouth, up to Multan (in today's Pakistan), where his feet would be located.<sup>23</sup> In another version (Jerath 2000: 21),

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.royalkangra.com/kangraminiaturepaintings.html>, accessed 14.12.2014 or: <http://www.3marg.info/pilgrimages/maa-jwalaji-temple/history-akbar-dhyanu-bhakt.shtml>, accessed 14.12.2014.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.sikh-heritage.co.uk/gurus/Angad/Guru%20Angad.htm>, accessed 14.12.2014.

<sup>21</sup> The exact date of his visit is not known, but it took place between 1743, the year of his arrival in India, and 1786, the year the French translation of his Latin text by Jean Bernoulli was published.

<sup>22</sup> See, among numerous other references: Hamilton 1819: 312.

<sup>23</sup> The episode reads: "The story which I heard in 1846, when I first visited the Kangra Valley, placed the head only of the Titan to the north of the Bias, with

Jalandhara's ears are located under the fort of Kangra, whose name is understood as "the fort of the ear", his mouth at Jwalamukhi, his back under the town of Jalandhar and his feet at Multan.

This subsidiary myth of Kangra's Jwalamukhi displays a strong parallelism with the myth of Baku, in both cases involving a giant, male, evil being buried underground. In the same manner, the oldest description of the rituals at Kangra's Jwalamukhi mentioned unorthodox (and impure) things thrown into the flame, such as alcohol, as well as the offering of a "head", recalling the Baku sacred fire's insensibility to impurity. Yet, no use of the flame to cook food or to burn dead bodies was recorded in Kangra, contrary to Baku.

But the network of holy flames continues further east, in western Nepal, at Dullu, the ancient capital of the Malla emperors, which is located in the middle of several such holy flames, and whose myth of origin connects to Kangra in the west as well as to Muktinath in the east, another place of worship famous for its eternal fire.

#### THE FIRE TEMPLES OF DULLU

Unlike to the two previous holy places, Dullu is almost unknown today though it is exceptional in many respects: built around "prodigies", the site has preserved a fascinating ritual organisation as well as rich oral traditions. It was only as late as in 1956 that two scholars<sup>24</sup> revealed the existence of a large empire ruled from Dullu and Jumla, covering today's western Nepal, the Indian state of Uttarakhand and the two Tibetan provinces of Guge and Purang.

The first ruler of this empire, Naga Malla, or "Snake the Great", founded the Malla dynasty at the very beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the empire collapsed at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At the end

---

his mouth at Jwalamukhi, while his body covered the whole extent of country lying between the Bias and the Satluj; his back being immediately beneath the district of Jalandhar and his feet at Multan." (Cunningham, quoted in Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 101).

<sup>24</sup> Namely Yogi Naraharinath (1955) and Giuseppe Tucci (1956). Yet G. Tucci, did not pay attention to the flames, while Yogi Naraharinath, offered a factual description only. Naraharinath's contribution to our knowledge of Dullu is essential, since he not only published most of the inscriptions found in this area and in the whole region, but also a good description of its various shrines and several religious texts related to it (among which the Vaisvanara purana). Unfortunately, none of them have been translated into any European language. His interest in Dullu stems partly from his own religious tradition: the Nath yogis are the priests of the most important shrines of Dullu, and the flames of Dullu as well as the king of Dullu is evoked in the sacred Nath formulas (see the introduction to the Vaisvanara purana). More recent publications on the history of the Malla Empire include Sharma (1972), Adhikary (1988) and Lecomte-Tilouine (2009).

of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Gorkhalis militarily unified the numerous small kingdoms, which had emerged after its collapse in western Nepal, but the small kingdom of Dullu remained independent, in reward for having collaborated with the Gorkhalis. It is only as late as 1960 that the Dullu Kingdom was legally abolished, but the king was granted the privilege to retain his title until his death. Thus for almost a millennium Dullu was a place of royalty, located in a religious complex known as the Panchakoshi, which includes several extraordinary natural phenomena worshipped as divine manifestations, notably gas flames.

Because of its specific features it is likely that Dullu was of ritual or political importance before its transformation into an imperial capital around 1100. Two ancient references may refer to Dullu: the first one is the episode of Buddha converting the three Kassapa brothers, who are presented as the heads of three large communities of fire worshippers along a river, which appears in the Mahāvagga (composed during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC).<sup>25</sup> As in the story, there are three main fire temples occupied by ascetics on the banks of river in Dullu. And like in the story, which goes that Buddha was warned by the heretic priest not to stay inside the fire temple because the flame was produced by a giant snake, which would devour him, the flames of Dullu are said to arise from such a giant snake. The second reference is included in the account of the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hsien, dating from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, who mentioned a place called the "fire limit", where Buddha subdued an evil deity, located 50 yojanas to the north of Sangkasya, a place itself located 18 yojanas to the south east of Mathura. This precise location quite corresponds to Dullu, and the name "fire limit" is related to the ancient name of Dullu, known as *Durlamghya vaiśvānara*, which means "impassable fire".

Roughly speaking, the flames of Dullu, located along a circle of rivers, frame the capital. Their numbers have varied in the course of time, from 32 mentioned in a royal genealogy to the ten included in Yogi Naraharinath's description in 1956. Today only three permanent flames are left, but Petroleum Nepal<sup>26</sup> recently counted 45 natural-gas holes in this area. These openings are well known to local inhabitants who enjoy lighting the gas, though only the flames that burn permanently are held as sacred and enshrined in temples. The Dullu fire temples are the main shrines of a holy area called Panchakoshi, and of which the royal palace of Dullu is the centre. Pilgrims circumbulate this area, especially for the salvation of their ancestors, and mark a stop at each fire temple where they receive different kinds of *prasād* from the ascetic priests: either the soot from the flame, which

<sup>25</sup> See Rhys Davis and Oldenburg 1881 I: 15–20.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.petroleumnepal.com.np](http://www.petroleumnepal.com.np) (accessed 30/10/2016).

is collected on a pan permanently kept above each flame for that purpose, or the “juice” of the flame, *jaljvālā*, a liquid which comes forth with the flame and which is said to cure several diseases. The ascetics also cook bread, *rot*, on the pan placed over the sacred fires, as an offering to Jwalaji, eaten as *prasād*. As in Baku, cooking on the sacred fire is therefore customary in Dullu, but this seemingly profane use of the fire is ritual in the latter context.

There is no known document about the Dullu area before the Malla dynasty, but in the very first document of this dynasty, dated 1223, Dullu is mentioned as the “territory of the flames” (*jvālākṣetra*). A later inscription dated 1358 mentions three holy fires (*vaiśvānara*) and attests to their worship by King Prithvi Malla. In 1393, another king of Dullu, Samsār Varma, described himself as “the king close to the flames”.<sup>27</sup>

The three main fire temples mentioned in the 1358 inscription are called “the place of the head”, “the place of the navel” and “the feet”, evoking a reclining divine body within the sacred royal territory. It is sometimes associated with the body parts of Sati, as in Kangra, but the myth of Sati does not encompass all the elements present in Dullu, such as the presence of a giant snake, and the only inclusive mythical narrative of the origin of the Panchakoshi ascribes the formation of the sacred flames to Shiva’s third eye, like in the myth of Jalandhara in Kangra.<sup>28</sup>

The story goes that Shiva, disturbed in his meditation on the top of Mount Kailash by Kama, the god of love, reduced him to ashes with the fire emerging from his third eye. The anthropomorphic fire then fell to earth, and its various parts (its head, navel, feet, etc.) scattered here and there in Dullu, while its ears (*kān*) fell in Kangra, and its mouth (*mukh*) in Muktinath. Later, a human named Naūs thought that Indra had died, and took his place as king of heaven. He then contrived to marry Indra’s wife, and she accepted on condition that he would come carried by the seven sages, Rishis. Naūs was placed in a palanquin, but his journey was delayed because the Rishis avoided stepping on a single insect on their way. King Naūs was furious. He kicked Rishi Durvāsyā, who cast this spell on him: “you will be a snake on the earth”. King Naūs fell in Dullu, in the shape of a giant snake, and lived there, half buried in a hole.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the Dullu

flames were weak, they could not consume sacrificial offerings. Taking a human form, the flame brought Arjun and his brothers, the Pandavas, to Dullu for them to kill the giant snake and to feed them with its fat. It is said that the flames of Dullu still burn from this giant subterranean snake’s fat.

The territory covered by the myth extends from Mount Kailash, the fire’s place of origin, to the north, Muktinath where the fire’s mouth fell to the east, and Kangra, where its ears fell to the West. Dullu, its centre, is depicted as a kind of concentration of this area, with numerous flames and body parts burning there. Interestingly, the extended territory of the flames, all born of the same fire, corresponds quite exactly to the area known as the Malla Empire. In Dullu itself, the sacred flames have long governed religious life and the kingdom’s organisation in a complex manner.<sup>30</sup>

Each of the fire temples is the centre of a small territory whose inhabitants lead their dead to that flame, and each of these temples play the role of a small royal capital within the heart of the Imperial centre. Attachment to one of these territories has been marked by an annual tax on the first rice and wheat crops. The ascetics attached to each temple go from one house to another collecting them. They then set up each a “religious granary”, the contents of which are distributed to the population attached to the temple in times of famine. For one day a year the fire temples were also turned into courts of justice, called religious council, to judge the inhabitants of the territory for their offences. Headmen and eminent persons were present but the council was chaired by ascetics (this practice ended in the 1980s). Each of the fire temples housed a jail, where those condemned were locked up, and some weapons, which were used when escorting captives or tax collectors. Finally, to this day ascetics are always addressed as “great king”, and they sit on a throne on which no one else may sit.

Reciprocally, the royal capital was transformed into a fire temple once a year for three days. On the sixth day of Dasain, a “warrior” dressed as an ascetic was sent to the flame of the feet to bring it back to the king, by way of a large wick. Assisted by Brahmins, the king then worshipped the fire in his palace, dressed as an ascetic, fasting and praying. At the end of the ritual, which confirmed the king’s royalty, all the ascetics of the kingdom converged on the palace to receive the king’s blessing. The rest of the time, the king formed part of this religious ensemble, since any pilgrim wanting his

pit from which dust and smoke used to come out. The phenomenon has not been active for the last few decades.

<sup>30</sup> For information on this organisation, see Lecomte-Tilouine 2009.

<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed account of the historical references to the fire in Dullu, see Lecomte-Tilouine 2009.

<sup>28</sup> A recording of the myth can be listened to on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1QJ3kFed9g>.

<sup>29</sup> The snake’s hole is located near the temple of Dhuleswar, where another prodigy is worshipped as a divine manifestation. Its temple contains a sacred

pilgrimage to be “complete” had to receive the vision of the king, after circumambulation of the various religious places of the kingdom. Nevertheless, the king also had to do the pilgrimage, at least at the beginning of his reign. King Malai Bam (14<sup>th</sup> century), ascended the throne under the following circumstances, according to a genealogy: having conquered all neighbouring territory, Malai Bam “went to the flames of the navel, of the head, and of the feet, went to Malika where he offered a fire sacrifice and then arrived in Dullu where he obtained kingship”. Since there is no longer a king, pilgrims go to the “throne of Dharmaraj”, a platform located near the royal palace, where the king, so it is said, used to dispense justice. No one knows exactly to whom the epithet Dharmaraj refers, and people attribute it either to Yama, the king of death, or to Yudhishthira, who established dharmic royalty in Dullu after King Naüs was condemned to become a snake, or to historical local sovereigns. There is in fact great continuity between these figures, Yama, being the ultimate king; Yudhishthira, the epic king of Dharma, possessing the latter’s qualities since he is his son, and the Dulal kings present themselves as the heirs to the latter. In this manner, death not only framed the sacred capital in the form of cremation fires but also reigned at its centre, on the throne of justice.

All the inhabitants of Dullu are cremated with the sacred flames, including the untouchables. Far from being soiled by such contact, they are endowed with an immutable purifying power.

In fact, dead bodies are their main offerings, and it is imperative that a man be burned every day to each sacred flame, and if this does not take place, the priests burn a human-like dummy made of grass instead. The flames maintain an analogy with the man-eating monster (King Nahus or Naüs) that feeds them. Yet their power of destruction is much more far-reaching, since no one living on their territory can escape it, except for their priests, who are not cremated but buried, as ascetics, said to be in a state of meditation, not dead. On yet a larger scale, one of them (the flame located on the opposite bank of Sirasthan) is said to be Kālagni, the fire of time, which destroys the universe at the end of the world, i.e. at the end of each time cycle. And in the same way that the sacred flames burn everyone except their priests, the fire of time is said to spare the territory of Dullu, the Panchakoshi, which is thus not only a place beyond the world, but also beyond time. This dimension is underlined, but understood in the opposite way, in a ritual song from a neighbouring region (Doti) (see Pant 1998: 622–31), which retells the origin of the world, plunged into darkness: a Brahman was told to go to Dullu and bring the holy fire down to earth to throw light upon it. In this narrative, Dullu is a celestial place concealing the primordial fire, which agrees to descend to earth on condition that men observe purity

rules, and it gives birth to the sun. The fire of Dullu is also used as an original fire in ritual practices: for instance if the eternal ascetic fire of Baidhyanath in Achham district dies, it cannot be relit by any other fire than the flames of Dullu.<sup>31</sup>

## MUKTINATH

Further east, the flames of Mutkinath connect the Hindu world to Tibet. Indeed, this major Hindu shrine is located in an area inhabited by a Tibetan-speaking population and the temple of Muktinath is a place of worship for both Hindus and Buddhists. Like Kangra’s Jwalamukhi, Muktinath is considered by the Hindus to be one of the 51 Shakti Pithas of the Indian sub-continent. But the Tibetans identify the sacred flame as a manifestation of Samvara and his spouse, and compare it to a “butter-lamp” (Snellgrove 1979: 108). Muktinath is a major place of pilgrimage, where Hindus (particularly the Twice-Born of the Hills) are supposed to go at least once in their life to wash at the 108 spouts of water and renew their sacred thread. The pilgrimage was already very famous (and already performed for the renewal of the sacred thread, so it seems) in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, a Tibetan reported for the years 1528–30 the presence of “countless yogins of various (spiritual) lineages” gathered for the “yearly washing ceremony” of an Indian king (Erhard 1993: 25). Water is the main *prasād*, or divine “remains”, for the pilgrims, who bring water from Muktinath back to their homes, in order to purify their relatives, especially those dying. The water of Muktinath, which flows from 108 spouts, is considered particularly holy because the sacred flame burns at its source. To a greater degree than in Kangra and Dullu,

<sup>31</sup> The same is true for all the “everlasting fires” (*akhanda dhuni*) maintained by ascetics within the Dullu territory.

<sup>32</sup> Today, the pilgrimage, by Siddhi B. Ranjitkar (2012), reads: “The day for changing the sacred thread is the full moon day in Sravon (July-August). You can go to any holy place and take a dip [...] You can take a chartered helicopter flight to Muktinath [...] stay there for an hour and change your sacred thread and then fly back to Kathmandu. You need to take quick showers under 108 stone spouts decorated with lion faces [...] Even in this month of a year, the water coming out of the spouts might be chilly if not cold for you to take a full shower because of the high altitude: more than 14,000 ft above the sea level. After purification shower taken, you go to the temple to the Muktinath god, pray to the god and then take the services of the priest sitting at the lower step of the stairs at the entrance to the temple for changing your sacred thread. If you have forgotten to take with you a sacred thread, don’t worry about it; the priest usually carries a bunch of such sacred thread and you can have one of them at a small price. As your helicopter is waiting for you, you follow the simplest possible rituals to wear a new sacred thread. The priest utters last few mantras to the sacred thread and then lets you wear it.”



the conjunction of fire and water (more precisely, cold water), forms the oxymoronic wonder worshiped by the devotees. Muktinath is also closely associated with Vishnu, whose chakra (disc) is found in the nearby river in the form of ammonites (Hamilton 1819: 79). A divine figure located above the spouts of water is considered to be the guardian snake Gawo Jogpa by the Tibetans, and identified as Vishnu by the Hindus (Snellgrove 1979: 107).

Muktinath is encompassed in the fire myth of Dullu and was part of the Malla Empire; after its collapse it remained dependent on the kingdom of Jumla, where one of the two imperial capitals was located. In addition, the site of Muktinath is akin to Dullu for being the residence of a snake, worshiped by the Tibetan devotees. Another remarkably common feature of the two places, which only concerns the local, Tibetan-speaking population, is the use of the sacred fire of Muktinath to ignite the funeral pyres of the dead, a fire which may be carried for a very long distance by motorbike for this purpose.<sup>33</sup>

From Baku to Muktinath, two distinct networks link flames together: the first is formed by the immense pilgrimage between the Small and the Big Flames of Kangra and Baku, the second, by the myth of formation of the greater territory of the flames which were scattered across the Malla Empire. Jwalamukhi of Kangra connects these two sets together, while it is also encompassed in two other networks of bodily nature, being the mouth of both a local giant, Jalandhara, which ties Kangra to Multan, the region of origin of most Hindu traders in Baku, and also of Sati Devi, whose body parts form a map of the Indian sub-continent, with its holiest point located in Hinglaj, Baluchistan. Dullu displays the same characteristics as an abode of both a devil giant buried underground, and of an ignited, dismembered and scattered divine female body. But beyond these various telluric hidden forms, Baku and Dullu display very specific parallels, in that in both places a giant evil body is said to feed the sacred flames with its fat. In both cases too, the giant body is buried vertically rather than lying across a huge territory as is the case of Jalandhara in Kangra or of Sati devi.

Baku and Dullu display another common feature of great importance: the use of the sacred fire to burn the dead, which is not reported about Kangra, but also attested to in Muktinath.<sup>34</sup> Pran Puri's

account makes it clear that the Hindu ascetics were cremated on the sacred fire of Baku, something which sharply contrasts with the immense graveyard of ascetics to which Kangra's Jwalamukhi was compared in the 1830s.<sup>35</sup> The last common point between the flames of Baku and Dullu is the use of the flames to cook food, by their very own priests. In Baku, the cooking was said to be profane, but the observers, who were expecting great precautions and a Zoroastrian cult, may have been too surprised to recognise the ritual dimension of this cooking. This dimension, however, is suggested by Pran Puri's inclusion of a cooking house in the list of the Hindu holy places in Baku, though he does not give more information. In Dullu, cooking is omnipresent in the various fire temples, since each sacred flame is permanently surmounted by a "frying pan" (*tavā*). Its function is to gather the black residue of the flame, which is taken off by the ascetics, who smear it on the visiting pilgrims' foreheads as a *prasād* from the goddess. But the yogis also regularly use the pan to cook breads, *rot*, which are symbolically offered to the flame, and then eaten as *prasād*.<sup>36</sup>

The common points in the myths and in the form of the rituals in Dullu and Baku are thus so numerous and so specific that it is probably not mere coincidence. And though no pilgrims from Nepal were reported in Baku, we know from Pran Puri's travels that numerous ascetics visited different sacred fires. Indeed, Pran himself visited three of the four eternal fires examined in these pages, as he went to Muktinath after having been to Kangra's Jwalamukhi and to the Great Flame of Baku (Anonymous: Duncan? 1810: 350). An undated map of Central Asia, drawn by a Hindu traveller, is strongly reminiscent of Pran's travel, with the same type of considerations. But the keys are written in Nepali, and this map thus forms a most interesting clue showing that pilgrimage routes ritually connected the natural gas flames of Baku to the territory of Nepal, and that the pilgrimage to Baku was also undertaken by travellers from Nepal. Called the "Nepali map of central Asia" by Susan Gole, who published it (1992), the map rather appears to be a road map from Nepal to the "Great Flame" [of Baku]. The drawing itself represents the area between Kashmir at the east and the Great Flame at the West, but the keys indicate the distances between most of the places represented and "Nepal". In the keys, the two terminal points are Nepal and the Great Flame, separated by the greatest of all the distances

<sup>33</sup> Personal communication with two informants from this region, who used this fire for the funerary rites of their relatives.

<sup>34</sup> This use in Kangra's Jwalamukhi may also exist, and be masked by the prominence of the pilgrimage. Indeed, I specifically had to ask two local inhabitants of the Muktinath area to learn about the cremational use of the Muktinath fire, which is not reported in the literature I have consulted on the place.

<sup>35</sup> In Dullu, the entire population, with the exception of the ascetics, is cremated by the fire of the sacred flames.

<sup>36</sup> Ritual cooking of bread is also performed for Baba Balak Nath, whose main shrine is located in Himachal Pradesh.

mentioned: 2,545 *koś* (approx. 7,635 km), while the part not represented in the map, between Nepal and Kashmir, is said to cover a distance of 777 *koś* (approx. 2,331 km).<sup>37</sup> The fact that the map only starts from Kashmir may indicate that the Himalayan range was known up to that point. The date of its drawing is not known, and S. Gole postulated that it could be 1855 (1992: 88). Yet the representation of the Great Flame suggests that it is probably older. Indeed, *Baḍi Jvālā*, the “Great Flame”, is represented as a hill covered with flames (see Fig. 9). The site is devoid of any building or temple, and we have seen in ancient descriptions of the Baku Fire that such a landscape corresponds to the “burning field” (*ager ardens*) described by Kämpfer in 1683, apart from the height of the hill on which the flames burn. Indeed the peninsula where the fire was located was only qualified as a “low flat hill” by Forster (1798: 229–30), and the drawing by Kämpfer represents a landscape dotted with small hills (see Fig. 2). But such an artificial elevation of the sacred fire is not something uncommon in Nepal, and we have seen that it also occurs in the devotional song from Doti, which depicts neighbouring Dullu as a celestial place, from where the original fire would have agreed to come down to earth, whereas, of course, Dullu is located on earth. It is not very likely that the Great Flame was only known to the author of the map by hearsay because the key describing the height of the flames is particularly precise.<sup>38</sup> At any rate, the Great Flame is the terminal point of the map, and it therefore seems reasonable to consider the map as a pilgrimage route guide from Nepal to the Great Flame, enriched with several historical, commercial and religious considerations.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The distances do not seem rigorous: for instance if we add the distance of 777 *koś* between Nepal and Kashmir, to the 320 *koś* between Kashmir and Kabul and the 1200 *koś* between Kabul and the Great Flame, the total obtained (2297 *koś*) is shorter than the distance indicated between Nepal and the Great Flame (2,545 *koś*); or else the latter measures another itinerary!

<sup>38</sup> It reads: “The hill of the Great Flame is 48 *koś* (about 144 km) in circumference. Night and day, from time to time, the flame rises to 7/8 cubits. Here and there on the sides of the hill, the flames rise up to one cubit and a half, one cubit, one handbreath, 6 fingers, 4 fingers, and until two fingers.” [A “finger” equals the width of a finger, about 1.5 cm]. (*Baḍi jvālā pahāḍ 48 kośko girdā cha. Rāt din bich bichmā jvālā 7/8 hāt uṭhtacha. pahāḍ kā cheucheumā ḍe (= ḍeḍhā) hāt. Yek hāt. Bittā. Cha aṃgul. Cār aṃgul. Dui aṃgul samma ko jvālā uṭhtacha*). Compare with Gole’s translation (1992: 85), in which I have highlighted the discrepancies: “The circumference of the badijwala [big fire] mountain is 48 cos. Frequently by day and by night the flames rise up to a height of 7 or 8 hands in measure. At the periphery of the mountain the flames measure a hand-spread, six, sometimes twelve but never less than two fingers”. I wish to thank Pustak Ghimire for his help in reading this legend.

<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that the map also mentions the road to Hingula, i.e. Hinglaj in Baluchistan, which, together with the Great Flame, is another far-located Hindu pilgrimage frequented by ascetics. These elements go against S. Gole’s

As a conclusion to this study, it is possible to argue that the extent to which pilgrims travelled from one to the other Eternal Fire may explain their common features. The influence of these Hindu pilgrims appears to have been great, and even today, Baku is sometimes depicted as one of the Shakti Pitha, where Sati’s heart would have fallen.<sup>40</sup> As a matter of fact, the modalities of the worship at the Eternal Fire of Baku did not contain any Zoroastrian elements. Yet, surprisingly, some of the practices associated with the flames of Dullu, in western Nepal, are reminiscent of what is known of fire worship in ancient Persia. Among the parallels, we can quote its conception as a celestial fire, fallen to earth, which was to be worshipped until it devours the whole universe (except its priests and place of worship); the transmission of the “original” fire to the king, and its use to lit the other sacred fires; finally, the strong political dimension of fire worship. Yet the essential association of the Dullu fires with death makes it a very unique cult, of which, probably, some elements spread up to Baku, in Azerbaijan, via adventurous Hindu pilgrims.

## REFERENCES

- ANONYMOUS. 1833. Le feu perpétuel de Bakou, par un voyageur russe. In: *Journal Asiatique*, 11: 358–82.
- ANONYMOUS (Duncan, Jonathan?). 1810. Oriental Observations N° X: The Travels of Pran Puri, a Hindoo, who travelled over India, Persia and part of Russia; Oriental Observations N° XI: The Travels of Pran-Puri, a Hindoo, who travelled over India, Persia and part of Russia. In: *The European Magazine and London Review*, 57: 261–71, 341–52.
- ADHIKARY, Suryamani. 1988 (rev. ed. 1997). *The Khasha Kingdom: A Trans-Himalayan Empire of the Middle Age*. New Delhi: Nirala Publications.
- ALLAMI, Abu L-Fazl. 1997. *The A-in-i Akbari*. Vol. II, transl. H.S. Jarrett. Delhi: Low price Publications.
- CHARDIN, Jean. 1686. *Journal du voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse et aux Indes Orientales, par la Mer Noire et par la Colchide*. Londres: Moses Pitt.

suggestion that the map could be an illustration of Raja Man Singh’s exploits two centuries and a half after his death, a suggestion based on the numerous references to a certain Raja Man, rightly identified as being Raja Man Singh of Amber (1550–1614), governor in Kabul. On the other hand, the various mentions of the territories he controlled, as well as the absence of any building at the Great Flame, points to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>40</sup> See: “In 1683 a German traveller Kaempfer visited Baku. He noted that there are seven fire holes at the Hindu temple. Originally when the temple was built it had nine eternal flames. This is the spot where Shiva’s wife Goddess Sati’s heart fell.” (<http://ajitvadakayil.blogspot.fr/2013/02/vedic-hindu-fire-temple-of-baku.html>, accessed 15.12.2014).

- CHARDIN, Jean. 1811. *Voyages du Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*. Nouvelle édition par L. Langlès. Paris: Le Normant.
- COOK, John (M. D. of Hamilton). 1770. *Voyages and Travels Through the Russian Empire, Tartary, and Part of the Kingdom of Persia*. Vol. II. Edinburgh: Cook.
- DUNCAN, Jonathan. 1799. An account of two fakeers. In: *Asiatik Researches*, 5: 37–48.
- ERHARD, Franz Karl. 1993. Tibetan sources on Muktinath: individual reports and normative guides. In: *Ancient Nepal*, 134: 23–39.
- FERISHTA, Mahomed Kasim. 1829. *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India, Till the year A. D. 1612*. Translated by J. Briggs, vol. I. London: Longman.
- FORBES, Robert J. 1958. *Studies in Early Petroleum History*. Leiden: Brill.
- FORSTER, George. 1808. *A Journey from Bengal to England through the Northern part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia by the Caspian Sea*, 2 vols. London: R. Faulder.
- FREYGANG, Fredericke de. 1816. *Lettres sur le Caucase et la Géorgie suivies d'une relation d'un voyage en Perse en 1812*. Hamburg: Perthes & Besser.
- GOLE, Susan. 1992. A Nepali map of Central Asia. In: *South Asian Studies*, 8: 81–89.
- HAMILTON, Francis Buchanan. 1819. *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*. Edinburg: A. Constable and Co.
- HEESTERMAN, Johannes C. 1992. Centres and fires. In: Bakker, Hans (ed.) *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interests*. Groningen: Egbert Forsten.
- HÜGEL, Charles. 1845. *Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab*. London: J. Petheram.
- HUTCHISON, John and Jean Philippe VOGEL. 1933. *History of the Panjab Hill States*. Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing.
- JACKSON, A.V. Williams. 1911. *From Constantinople to the Home of Omar Khayyam*. New York: MacMillan.
- JERATH, Ashok. 2000. *Forts and Palaces of the Western Himalayas*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
- KÄMPFER, Engelbert. 1712. *Amoenitates Exoticae*. Lemgoviae: Meyerus.
- LECOMTE-TILOUINE, Marie (ed.) 2009. *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*. Almora: Almora Book Depot.
- LERCHE, Johann Jacob. 1791. *Russisch-kaiserlichen Collegienraths, und Doctors der Arzeneywissenschaft, Lebens- und Reise-Geschichte*. Halle: Verlegt von Curtis Witwe.
- MODI, Jivanji Jamshedji Sir. 1926. *My Travels Outside Bombay: Iran, Azerbaizan, Baku*. Transl. by Soli Dastur.  
<http://www.avesta.org/modi/baku.htm>.
- MOUNSEY, James. 1748. The extract of a letter from Dr. James Mounsey, Physician of the Czarina's Army, to Henry Baker F. R. S. concerning the Everlasting Fire in Persia. In: *Phil. Trans.*, 45 (January 1, 1748): 296–300.
- NARAHARINATH, Yogi. 1955 (2012 V.S.). *Itihas prakas* 1. Mrigasthali: Itihas-Prakas-Mandal.
- . 1956 (2013 V.S.). *Itihas prakas* 2, 1. Mrigasthali: Itihas-Prakasak-Samgha.
- . 1956 (2013 V.S.). *Itihas prakas* 2, 3. Mrigasthali: Itihas-Prakas-Samgha.
- PANT, Jayaraj. 1998 (2055 V.S.). *Anjulibhari sagun poltabhari phag*. Kathmandu: Nepal Rajkiya Pragya-Pratisthan.
- PATENÔTRE, Jules. 1874. Un voyage d'hiver au Caucase. In: *La Revue des deux mondes*, décembre 1874: 509–35.
- RANJITKAR, Siddhi B. 2012. Changing sacred thread in Nepal. In: *Metro*, 32 (August 5, 2012).  
<http://66.7.193.115/culture/changing-sacred-thread-in-nepal-1> (accessed 15.11.2014)
- REV. H. 1838. Remains of Lord Viscount Royston. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, December: 571–95.
- RHYS DAVIS, Thomas W. and Hermann OLDENBURG (transl.). 1881. *Mahavagga*. The Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XIII. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- SHARMA, P. R. 1972. *Preliminary Study of the Art and Architecture of the Karnali Basin, West Nepal*. Paris: CNRS.
- SNELLGROVE, David. 1979. Places of pilgrimage in Thag (Thak khola). In: *Kailash*, VII/2: 75–170.
- STEWART, Colonel C. E. 1897. Account of the Hindu Fire-Temple at Baku, in the Trans-Caucasus province of Russia. In: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 29/2: 311–18.
- SUZANNET, Comte de. 1841. Les provinces du Caucase sous la domination russe. In: *Revue des deux mondes*. 4ème série, tome 26: 50–106.
- TIEFFENHALER, Joseph. 1786. *La géographie de l'Indoustan, écrite en latin, dans le pays même, par le Père Joseph Tieffenhaler*, trans. J. Bernoulli, vol. I: *Description historique et géographique de l'Inde*. Berlin: C.S. Spener.
- TUCCI, Giuseppe. 1956. *Preliminary Report on Two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*. Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Vaisvanarapurāṇam. Dullu jvaladeviko itihas*. Kashi: Goraksatilla, 1955 (2012 V.S.).
- VAN HALEN, Don Juan. 1827. *Narrative of Don Juan Van Halen's Imprisonment (...) to which are added His Journey to Russia (...)*. Vol. II. London: H. Colburn.

**Fig. 1:** Location of the four “everlasting fires” of Baku, Kangra, Dullu and Muktinath (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine).

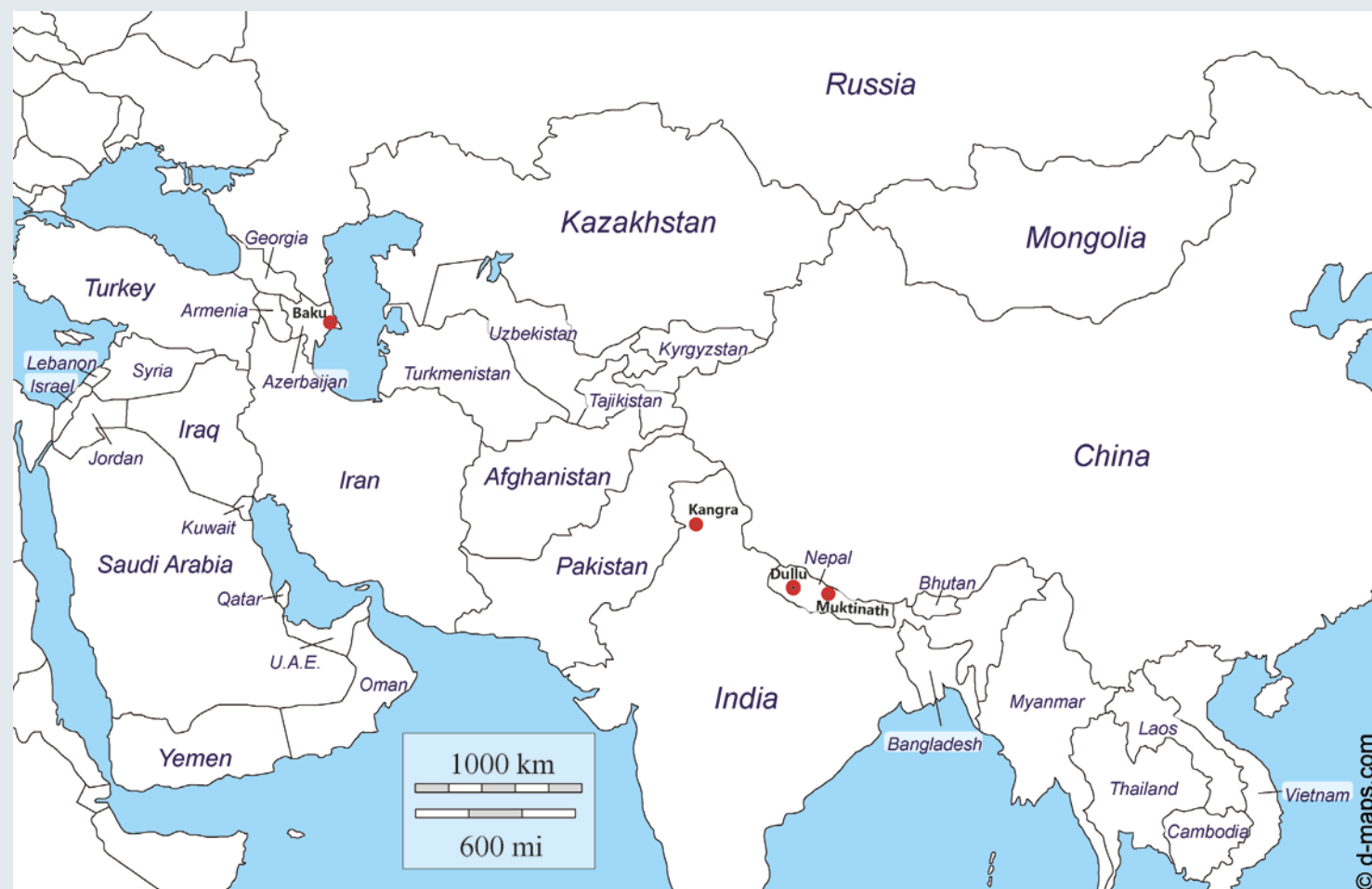






Fig. 2: Fire worshippers at the Burning Field (*ager ardens*) near Baku, in 1683 (detail from the engraving entitled *Urbs Backu*, Kämpfer 1712) (© Bibliothèque Nationale de France).



Fig. 3: Map showing the city of Baku and the Burning Field in 1683 (detail from the engraving entitled *Urbs Backu*, Kämpfer 1712) (© Bibliothèque Nationale de France).



Fig. 4: The Baku Fire temple in 1854 ("Le temple des feux éternels à Bakou", d'après les dessins de M. F. D'Herbès, *L'illustration, journal universel*, 23 février 1856, p. 129).

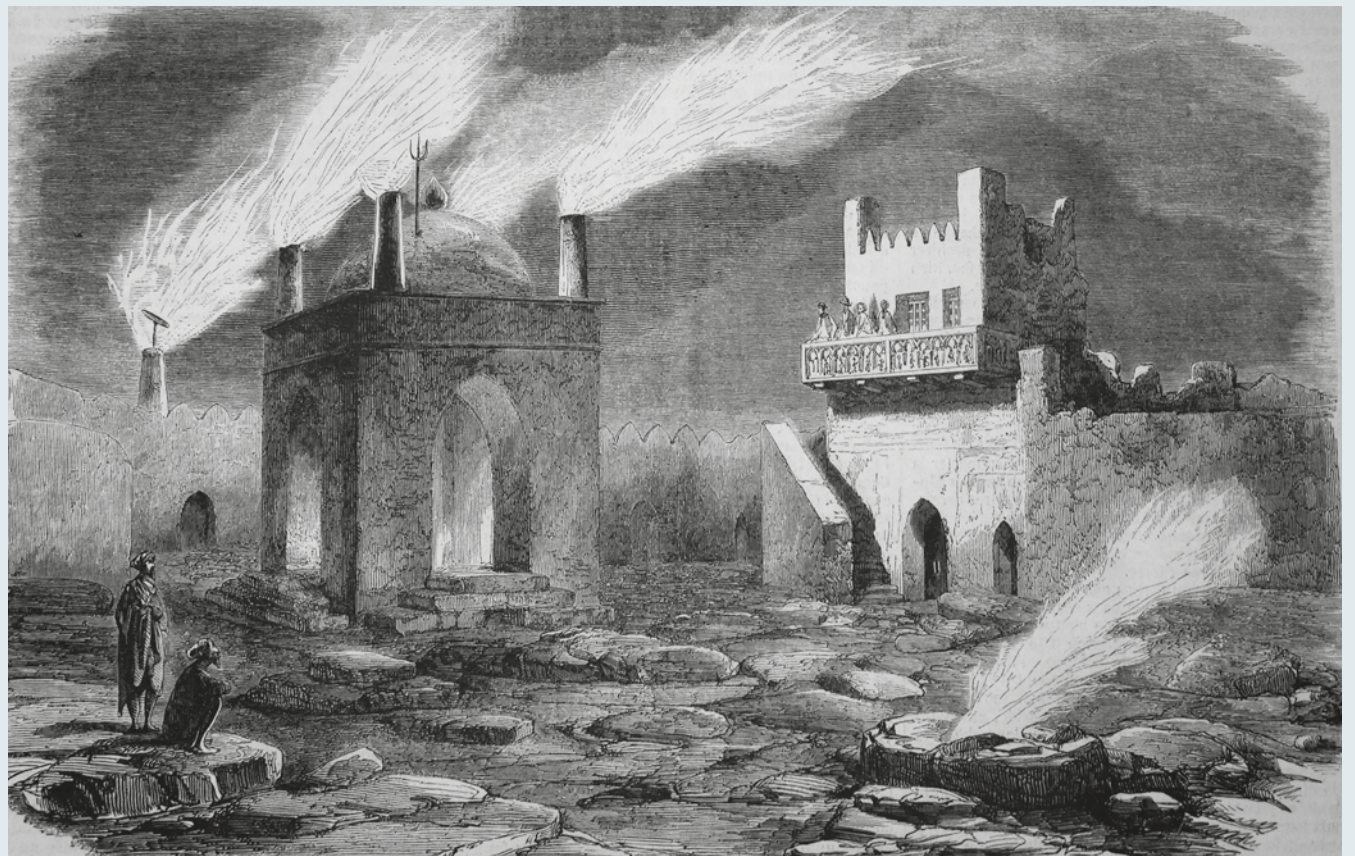


Fig. 5: The Nath yogi priest of the "Flame of the head", Sirasthan, Dullu, with his ritual pan (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine).

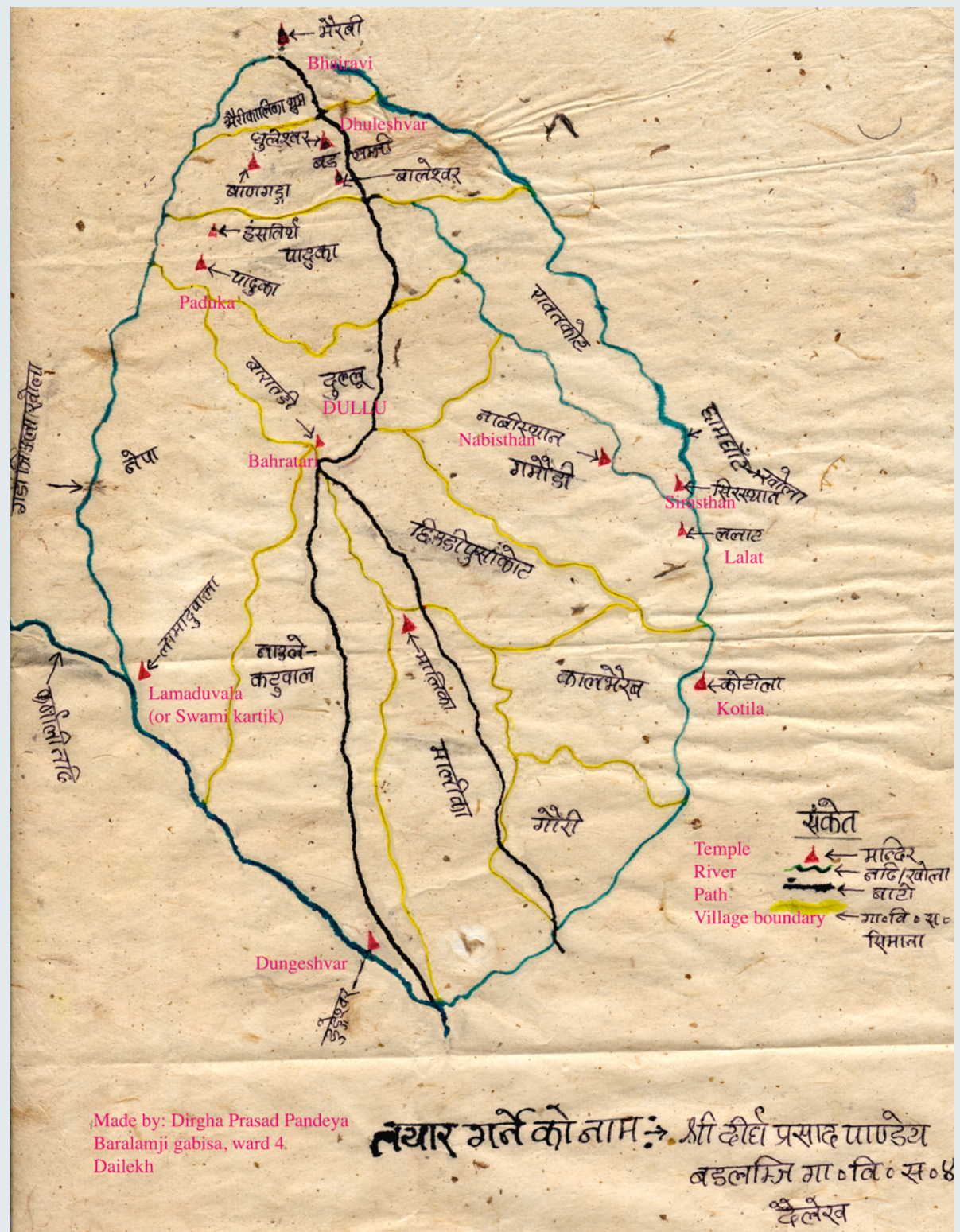




Fig. 6: The "greater" Territory of the Flames of Dullu, as narrated in their myth of origin, covering the area of the Malla Empire (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine).



Fig. 7: A local map of the Panchakoshi of Dullu, drawn in 2000 by Dirgha Prasad Pandeya, astrologer in Dullu (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine).





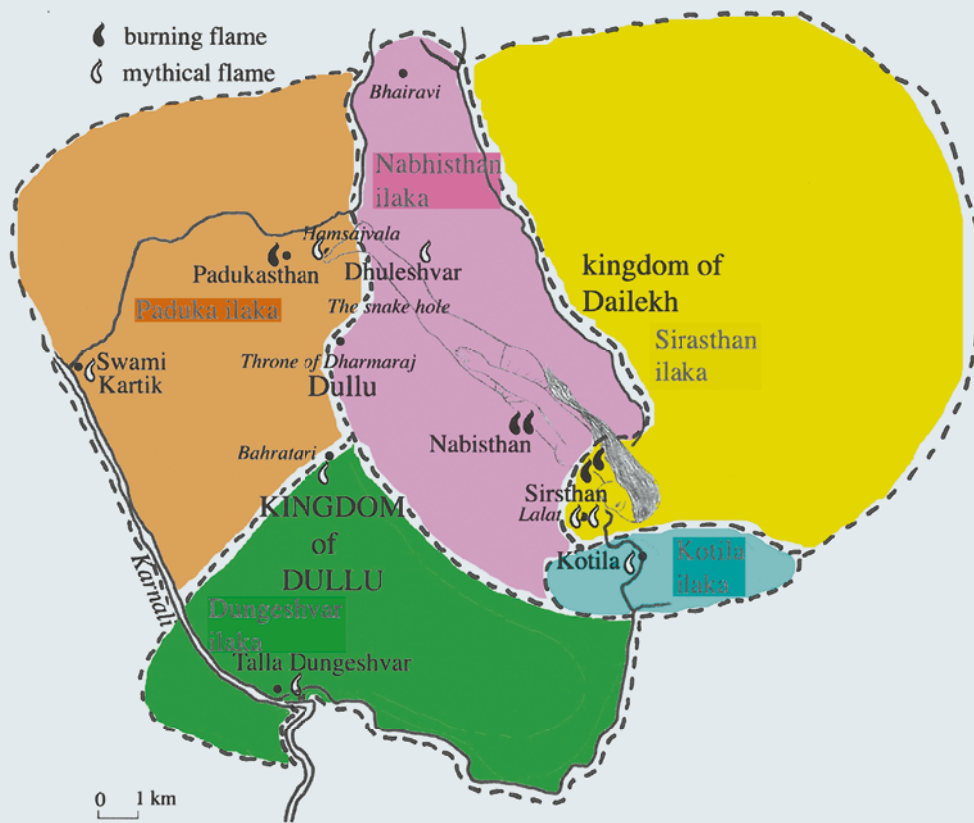


Fig. 8: The flames and their domains (*ilaka*) within the Imperial "Territory of the Flames" in Dullu (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine).



Fig. 9: The "Great Flame", detail of a "Nepali Map of Central Asia", undated (drawing from the photo of the map, private collection, published in Susan Gole 1992) (© M. Lecomte-Tilouine)