

MAKING SCIENTISTS INTO CLIMBERS

(Excerpt From *Secrets of the Sky Caves: Danger and Discovery on Nepal's Mustang Cliffs*)

by Sandra Athans

Editor's Note: *This piece is an excerpt from Secrets of the Sky Caves by Sandra Athans. The book describes a series of expeditions to the sky caves of the Mustang Cliffs, located in a remote part of the Asian nation of Nepal. The caves, built near the tops of steep cliffs, contain manuscripts and bones of the cliff dwellers, including a 2,000-year-old skull. Peter Athans and a group of scientists, scholars, and mountain climbers explored these caves from 2007 to 2013. Peter's sister, Sandra Athans, wrote about these expeditions.*

On the expeditions were Peter Athans, the leader; his wife Liesl and their two children; Mark Aldenderfer, an archaeologist; Charles Ramble, a scholar of Tibetan history; Jeff Watt, an expert on Himalayan art and history; and Kris Ericksen, a climber and photographer. This excerpt chronicles the group's dangerous climb to the sky caves and their discovery of the Bon manuscript written by scribes. The manuscript contained prayers, religious lessons, and an illustration of the founder of the Bon faith.

Scaling the unstable cliffs in Mustang is risky, even for world-class mountain climbers. For Charles Ramble and the other scholars, the risks were even greater. They are not trained mountain climbers. 1

It was important for the scientists to study the artifacts and caves on-site. Context, or the environment in which materials are found, can provide important clues about a discovery. For instance, Aldenderfer needed to examine the high cave cities up close. Ramble had to see the Tibetan papers as they lay in the cave. That way, they could note details that might be overlooked if they left it to the mountain climbers to collect and photograph materials for them. "History is very important," said Ramble. "You can't make up the past. You have to look very 2

carefully at what the evidence is. The general lesson is, don't take anything at face value and don't accept anything without evidence."

To make the climbing easier for the scientist, the team selected its routes carefully. It tried to avoid areas that demanded advanced climbing skills. "We tried to access the caves by the safest route possible," said Kris Ericksen. 3

The climbing was especially hard for Ramble because he had a fear of heights. But he said, "When you want knowledge so badly, you can't let things get in the way. My fear of heights was not going to prevent me from accessing that cave." 4

To help Ramble overcome his fear, the climbers coached him as he climbed. Athans guided and encouraged him with instructions such as, "Face into the rock. Place your left foot first and then place your right hand on the yellow rock by your thigh. That's it, Charles." 5

Library in the Sky

Ramble made a successful climb. Once he was inside the cave, he took a deep breath. An instant later, he was again breathless. Several feet from the cave opening, a thick carpet of thousands of written pages lay before him. Some of the text had been created with woodblock printing. Other writing had been penned by hand. Some pages featured tiny paintings. The pages glistened in the natural light coming from the cave opening. 6

The papers were in shambles. They were covered with bird droppings and had been battered by harsh weather. Some of the paintings had been cut from their pages—stolen by looters some time before. 7

The team collected and lowered the papers in a climber's haul bag to the lamas at the base of the cliff. The explorers sent down thirty loads—eight thousand pages in all. Once he was safely down the cliff face, Ramble and the other team members set up a field lab in a tent at the base of the cliff. There, they photographed and scanned the entire collection of papers. The job took hours. 8

Ramble knows how to read ancient Tibetan. He saw that the papers in the cave were mostly from a single ancient manuscript. It contained information on the Bon faith. The lamas also knew ancient Tibetan. They helped Ramble translate the text into English. 9

To learn more about the manuscript, Ramble and the others searched for the last page. They hoped it contained information called a colophon. The colophons of ancient manuscripts often list the name of the person who owned the document, the name of the scribe—the person who did the writing and printing—and the date the document was created. 10

Scouring the thousands of pages for the colophon was a lot like searching for a needle in a haystack. But to everyone’s amazement, the team members found it. The colophon revealed the name of the scribe who had written out the Bon text. It also named the nobleman who had hired him to write it. But it did not provide a date for the manuscript. 11

In addition to the manuscript, the team found other written materials in the cave. Members found a book of proverbs, or wise sayings, and a manual for solving legal disputes. With the help of the lamas, Ramble translated these documents too. 12

Editor’s Note: *Many expeditions to the Mustang Cliffs followed the one described in this excerpt. The human remains discovered in the caves have been stored in Mustang. A site that contains a cave mural has protective enclosures to keep the drawings safe. Charles Ramble continues to translate the Bon manuscripts, now stored in a Buddhist monastery in the village of Lo Monthang. Ramble works with scholars from Nepal and other parts of the world to translate the manuscript that interests students of religion. The scientific studies of the artifacts found in the caves are ongoing and will take many years to complete.*

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