

Mining in Silbertal

The most significant mining area in the county Vorarlberg was in ancient times on the sunny slopes of Silbertal and Bartholomäberg. Silbertal (The Silver Valley) still resembles beautifully an indication of former mining activities in its name. Bartholomäberg, which is the oldest settlement in the Montafon valley, was once called Montafon. Around 1300AD the inhabitants chose the miners' and tanner's patron saint, St. Bartholomew, to be the patron saint of the church, community and the village. From then on the village was re-named Bartholomäberg.

Traceable mining dates back to the Carolingian period. In the famous Rhaetian Urbar (Legislative Executive Order) dated 842, an income directory of the Diocese of Chur, the "iron district or *ministerium ferraires*" and eight furnaces are mentioned.

The sixth part of all the metal gained had to be paid as the "King's interest". Only the sheriff/mayor, named Wanzaningas, was exempted from this levy.

The mining activities of iron, silver and copper attracted numerous labourers seeking work on "Kristberg's" and "Bartholomäberg's" mighty ridges. Because of the mining industry and the peasant cultural activities the landscape gradually transformed. Piece by piece over time the tireless, unassuming man gained it as his "Heimat or homeland".

A document from 1319 reports about one silver mine. Here you can read that the German King Frederick the Fair allowed his uncle, Count Albrecht von Werdenberg (Bludenz), among other things, to bequeath his kingdom fief to his brother, the Count Huo referred to as, "argentifodina seu mons dictus Muntafune (the silver mountain or the mountain named Munatfune)". The fact that this pit was in the ownership of the crown (Reichslehe) does show its importances. The pit was called from now on „Silberberg or Silver Mountain“(the former name of Silbertal) and the miners were called the „Silberer or the Silver Man“.

Once under Duke Sigismund, the restorer of the coin, the famous silver mines "Falkenstein" in Schwaz, Tyrol were opened in 1448, which aroused the desire for mining throughout the entire realm. New, rich silver lodes on "Kristberg" were discovered and thus a new boom seemed to have entered. During this time the miners' chapel on "Kristberg" originated. It was first mentioned in 1450AD. God-fearing miners built it in gratitude for the miraculous rescue following a landslide in a collapsed tunnel. According to records, the accident site is where there is a grey area on the north wall of the chapel. This can be seen even to this day. In 1992 this was historically confirmed during renovation work where the old tunnel entrance was exposed.

The structural renovation of the St. Agatha chapel was carried out in 1507 by Kaspar Schop from Bludenz. In a vault rib in the choir you can see he has chiselled in his stone mason seal, name and title, named year as well as a "Sun Cross" (see pictogram below). This structural modification, which also meant an extension is connected with the founding of the Holy

Trinity Brotherhood in 1493. Today this beautiful miners' chapel is the oldest chapel found in the Montafon valley and it is well worth a visit.

Emperor Karl V grouped the mines of Montafon under the Mining Regulations 1522 into two natural locations, "high and "low". The first group included mines on Kristberg, in the Alpe Fresch, the "mine to the iron door" as well as the Alpe Algueß. Whereas, the mine at "St. Bartlemesberg next to the parish church" belonged to one of the "low". The working week in the "low" mine consisted of six days, ten hours per day whereas in the "high" mines it was only five days.

After little more than one hundred years of golden age came the decay of the mining operations. The decisive factors were: the exhaustion of individual mines, the lack of funds to continue operating, disputes among the individual trades and miners', disruptive acting world events and the influx of precious metals from the discovered new worlds. Regarding the processing it is known that the ore was melted on the "Schmelzhof or smelting yard". The forest around the smelt was the "Bannwald or protective forests", still locally called "Bawald", in which only the timber were logged for smelting the ore.

Between 1886 and 1887 the Schrunser bookbinder Joh. Josef Fritsch, born in 1853, sought and gathered evidence of mining. In his records we found:

1. Mining operations (tunnel) in Röfitobel, outside the church.
2. Mining operations (tunnel) and mining waste on the "Hägili", "Feschli" and "Knappawiesle". Copper, iron, and malachite can be found in the mining waste.
3. Melting furnace, fifteen minutes inside the church, furnace slag and dilapidated waterworks.
4. Mining operations (tunnel) inside the Bann forest next to the Alpine pastures.
5. Mining operations (tunnel) on the Alpgueß, in the Alp Fafluna and in the Alps Fresch and Fanäschgla.
6. Mining operations (tunnel and shafts) on Kristberg in large numbers, inside the church and under the church and beyond until reaching the "Frömling".
7. Mining operations (tunnel) and mining waste in "Lobinger" on the "Klostertaler" side.

The old wealth "Unter Tag or working underground" has been finally long exhausted. Today visible traces of former pit mining openings have been either sealed, covered and are overgrown. Never-the-less, slagheaps still continue to rise above the valley's natural slopes. Funnel-shaped subsidence mark the passage of sunken mine works/tunnels. So the history of the valley is not only written on parchment but has also dug deep runes in the "Heimat" with ancient legends and memories in the spirit of the locals.

Emil Scheibenstock

Historical overview of the Walser

Around 1300AD the Walser, who left Valais (Switzerland) because of lack of space, ongoing feuds between the authorities and economic hardship, were forced to emigrate and settle in the valley. Firstly on their travels they tried to settle in the sparsely populated Graubünden. But from there a majority moved on to Vorarlberg. The Montafon Counts granted them not only "land" but also extended rights which were not common at that time. The Walsers could bequeath, give away or sell their land and personal possessions; they had only to pay the annual interest to the landlord. Self-administration and judiciary were important privileges.

The hands of these tireless people who were accustomed to venturing into the utmost "wild Höchinnen" won, because of their peasant work through cultivation, piece by piece settlement land from the forest wilderness where once bears and wolves lived, green meadows emerged with their herds of cattle.

But they were also active in the mining industry which played a big part in the valley. The momentous deed of the Counts of Werdenberg in 1355 the "Silberer and Walsern" are repeatedly mentioned. A silver mine is recorded in a document dated 1319. From the 15th to mid-16th century was the golden age of mining. Silver, copper and iron were being mined. In more than a hundred tunnels in Silbertal to Kristberg and Bartholomäberg it was being dug for the much sought after "*Mountain Blessing*". With hard and perilous work the miners try to mine the veins of ore under the sallow light of kindling torches. Then the collapse of the mining operations due to lack of funds to continue operation, exhaustion of individual mines and the influx of cheaper precious metals discovered in the new world. Evidence of mining can be seen by two open tunnels in Bartholomäberg and large slagheaps above the natural slope of the valley. Inerasable remains though, the memory of the "silver age in Montafon" by the miners' chapel on Kristberg and the field names Ferrär, Kupferställi, Knappaschrofa, Knappagruaba, Schmelzhof etc.

Translation by Helen Agar-Dorfner, January 2016

A Mining Song:

The miner's pleasure

A miner is going to the dark shaft

fortunate to do the work, his heart is laughing

when he sees the gleaming treasure of the world

in the bright shine of his lamp