

HISTORIC MINING IN THE MONTAFON VALLEY



One of the most fascinating aspects of the Montafon region in Vorarlberg – Austria’s most western state – is its mining history. Bartholomäberg, being the oldest settlement of this valley, was called Monafon until about 1300 AD. Around this time, the inhabitants elected St. Bartholomew, the patron of miners and tanners, as the patron saint of their church and their community. However, it is noteworthy that excavations at the location of the “Platta” in Bartholomäberg unearthed much more ancient remnants of a human settlement of the Bronze Age (2300 BC). The whole, extremely sunny hillside offered more favorable living conditions, which was certainly a major reason for choosing this spot.

The earliest mining activities are mentioned in a Carolingian document (842 AD) connected with Chur (Switzerland). More intensive mining in this region set in about 1000 years ago in the 11th/12th century as established through radio carbon dating of charcoal. The prospect of striking promising silver, copper, and iron ore deposits on the slopes of the “Kristberg – Bartholomäberg” area attracted a considerable number of people in need of gaining a livelihood. The first documented mention of the “Silberberg” (i.e. Silvermountain) – later on “Silbertal” (i.e. Silvervalley) - dates to the year 1319.

The period with the highest yields was then reached between 1450 – 1550 when rich silver veins were struck. During this one-hundred-year period silver, copper, and iron ore were mined in more than 100 galleries and shafts. As Bartholomäberg was situated at ‘lower’ altitude, a work-week consisted of six day shifts – at ‘higher’ altitude 5 days - each one lasting 10 hours. These mining activities left quite drastic marks on the terrain and environment. Iron ore mining was usually opencast mining, which meant digging only a small distance beneath the surface. Short shafts were driven into the ground and the excavated material was deposited like a ring around the shaft opening thus forming so-called ‘pingen’. (The German word has been adopted by English.) Recent excavations found on the ancient, original surface below the mounds quite a number of remains of charcoal which they were able to date. Extensive logging constituted an essential part for processing ores since huge amounts of wood were needed to fire the smelting furnaces or to be used as gallery supports. This practice left hillsides and slopes vulnerable to impacts of erosion and avalanches.

Signs of these ancient mining activities can still be seen or detected in different locations and various forms: debris-covered pit openings (entrances), decayed water pipes, caved-in pingens in the form of funnel-shaped depressions or sink-holes, or traces of pingens lines.

The chapel on the Kristberg, consecrated to St. Agatha, is the oldest one of the Montafon and was documented for the first time in 1450. Since then it has undergone some renovations and additions. The signature mark of the mason Kaspar Schopf from the near-by town of Bludenz can still be seen with its date of 1507 AD and a sun symbol on an arch of the vault in the choir.

As legend has it, this chapel was built out of gratitude for the successful rescue of miners who were saved when a gallery had collapsed. It is assumed that the rescue hole was located at the northern wall of the chapel which still shows a grey, round spot where it was blocked up later on. A vault in the middle of the upper church wall has been detected, leading experts to the conclusion that the gallery led from the chapel direct into the mountain. This wall constitutes one of the oldest original parts of the structural fabric of this small but remarkable church.

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*