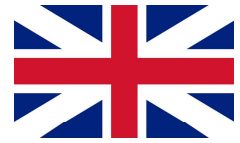


HISTORIC MINING IN THE MONTAFON VALLEY



One of the most fascinating aspects of the Montafon region in Vorarlberg – Austria’s westernmost province – is its mining history. Bartholomäberg, the oldest settlement in the valley, was known as Monafon until around 1300 AD. At that time, the locals chose Saint Bartholomew – the patron saint of miners and tanners – as the protector of their church and community. Interestingly, excavations at a site called “Platta” (a local plateau area in Bartholomäberg) unearthed remains of a much older settlement dating back to the Bronze Age (around 2300 BC). The entire, exceptionally sunny hillside offered ideal conditions for settlement and was likely a key reason for choosing this location.

The earliest references to mining in the area appear in a Carolingian document from 842 AD linked to Chur (Switzerland). More substantial mining activities in the region began around 1000 years ago, in the 11th or 12th century, as confirmed by radiocarbon dating of charcoal remains. The prospect of valuable silver, copper, and iron ore deposits on the slopes of the Kristberg–Bartholomäberg area attracted a significant number of people seeking a livelihood. The first official mention of “Silberberg” (Silver Mountain), later known as “Silbertal” (Silver Valley), dates from 1319.

The peak of mining productivity occurred between 1450 and 1550, when rich silver veins were discovered. During this century, more than 100 galleries and shafts were used to extract silver, copper and iron ore. At lower altitudes, such as Bartholomäberg, the working week consisted of six ten-hour shifts; at higher altitudes, five shifts. These mining efforts left a clear mark on the landscape and environment. Iron ore was typically mined in open-cast operations, just beneath the surface. Shallow shafts were dug, and the spoil was piled in a ring around the entrance – forming what are known as ‘pingen’ (shallow mining pits formed by collapsing shafts).

Recent excavations on the original ground level beneath these spoil heaps have uncovered significant charcoal remains, which have been dated accordingly. Vast quantities of wood were needed for smelting and to support mine galleries, resulting in extensive deforestation. This made hillsides more prone to erosion and avalanches.

Traces of this early mining can still be found throughout the region: debris-covered mine entrances, decayed wooden water pipes, collapsed ‘pingen’ forming funnel-shaped depressions or sinkholes, and remnants of ‘pingen lines’ (linear sequences of collapsed mining pits).

The chapel on the Kristberg, dedicated to Saint Agatha, is the oldest in the Montafon. It was first mentioned in 1450 and has since undergone several restorations and extensions. The master mason Kaspar Schopf from nearby Bludenz left his distinctive mason’s mark (a traditional stonemason’s symbol or signature carved into stone), along with the year 1507 and a sun symbol, on one of the vault arches in the choir.

According to legend, the chapel was built in gratitude for the miraculous rescue of miners following a tunnel collapse. It is believed that the rescue shaft was located at the chapel’s northern wall, which still shows a round grey patch where the opening was later sealed. A small vaulted structure in the upper part of the church wall marks the entrance of the original

commemorative chapel, and the location of the ventilation shaft used during the rescue. This section is one of the oldest surviving parts of the chapel and adds to its special significance.

A Mining Song:

The Miner's Joy

A miner walks into the darkened shaft,
His heart is light with pride and craft,
His lamp alight, the tunnel bright,
Reveals the world's hidden gleaming might.