

Lotus Leaves

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HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW: THE RACE TO DOCUMENT UPPER TIBET'S IRON AGE CIVILIZATION BEFORE THE EVIDENCE IS CARRIED AWAY

Over the last decade, a project to inventory pre-Buddhist archaeological sites in Upper Tibet has led to the charting of over 500 paleocultural sites, mostly pre-dating the first diffusion of Buddhism to Tibet. Upper Tibet is the sparsely populated northern and western portion of the Tibetan Plateau. This vast, extremely elevated region of broad plains and snowy mountain ranges is as large as Texas and California combined. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet during her imperial period (early 7th to mid 9th century). Probably from the second half of the first millennium BCE, Upper Tibet began to exhibit all the trappings of a sophisticated civilization. It produced an extensive Iron Age network of fortresses, temples, megaliths, necropoli, and rock art theatres, all of which stand in sharp contrast to later Buddhist art and architecture.

Tibetan literary sources indicate that Iron Age Upper Tibet had an advanced religious and political culture. The archaic literature of Tibet, dating to the 8th and 9th centuries, details complex funerary rites, rituals for the propitiation of the native pantheon, and elaborate ministerial posts and awards, showing that indigenous culture had evolved over a period of many centuries.

Through GIS analysis, the archaeological project is finding ancient settlement patterns and the ways in which they have changed over the last two or three millennia. Excavation of selected sites should begin within the next two



Figure 1. Red ochre head of practitioner or deity of Tibet's indigenous Bon religion. Shentsa County cave painting, pre-1000 C.E. approx. 25 cm.

years, providing the archaeometric data needed to fathom the cultural hallmarks and chronological phases of pre-Buddhist civilization in Upper Tibet.

Of the approximately 500 pre-Buddhist sites inventoried, nearly half have been vandalized or destroyed in the last two decades. The Tibetans themselves are plundering old monuments in order to collect stones for house and corral construction. Pre-Buddhist archaeological sites are particularly vulnerable because the local population has little understanding or appreciation of their immense scientific and cultural value. Before the arrival of Chinese Communism, ruins were largely left unmolested for fear of the spirits inhabiting them. It was commonly believed that those who dared harm these

places would incur the wrath of the local gods. As traditional beliefs fade, people are increasingly emboldened to despoil ancient monuments. Furthermore, in the period before Chinese rule, Tibetans lacked the technical means to remove large quantities of building materials from remote locations. Among the sites that have been razed are some of Eurasia's most outstanding Iron Age funerary pillar complexes. For example, in the last 15 years every one of the approximately 3000 stelae of the large mausoleum of Kyang Tsado Gyangro (Ruins of Onager Grass Confluence) in Shentsa County were either broken or uprooted to build livestock pens and winter grazing enclosures.

Now that a comprehensive inventory of pre-Buddhist

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Figure 2. The west complex of the pre-Buddhist necropolis of Khangmar Dzashak (Red House Blanket of Talus). Measuring 30m (east to west) by 12m (north to south), the remains of this array of pillars are oriented in the cardinal directions. In the background, the ruins of the appended temple-tomb are visible. This distinctive type of funerary monument helps define the territorial extent of the Upper Tibet Iron Age paleocultural zone.

surface sites is nearly completed, the threats can be adequately judged and measures taken to insure that they endure. Fortunately, the Tibetan Autonomous Region and central government of the People's Republic of China are interested in the protection of pre-Buddhist monuments and rock art. A preliminary conservation plan has been prepared and it is likely that the funds and administrative backing needed for implementation will be forthcoming. Time, however, is of the essence. Every month the superstructures of more graves are being removed, and the walls of fortresses and temples dismantled. A very unwelcome recent intrusion is the arrival of organized gangs from western China that are breaking into and looting graves. From a study of the Lhasa and mainland Chinese antiques markets, it is clear that this illegal activity has led to the loss of artifacts of exceptional scientific and aesthetic value.

The Chinese government's interest in conservation is heartening and may soon lead to a concrete plan to rescue Tibet's vast pre-Buddhist heritage. Another positive element is the deep concern of the natives of Upper Tibet for the viability of their culture and religion. However, pre-Buddhist archaeology and culture have only recently been considered valid subjects for research, and Tibetans have thus cultivated very little admiration for their prehistory. If an awareness campaign can be launched to inform local residents

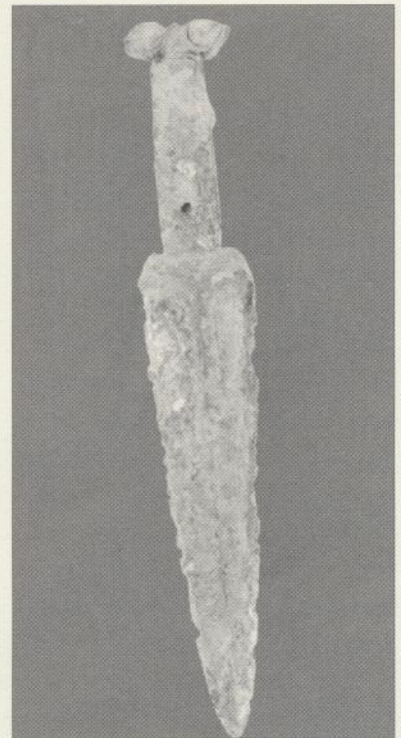


Figure 3. Copper alloy dagger. Tsamda County. 1st millennium BCE, approx. 30 cm.

about the value of their ancient past, they are bound to respond favorably.

To make a conservation project successful, relevant officials in all the counties and townships of Upper Tibet will need to receive some training. Once government officials have been made aware of conservation issues, they can reach out to the nomads and farmers in their jurisdiction. A project to protect the region's early cultural heritage will not only be of benefit to scientists and antiquarians, but it will also serve to foster fundamental values. Tibetans are desperately trying to reconnect with the wellspring of their traditions, lest they disappear under the onslaught of rapid social, demographic and economic change. A respectful acquaintance with their pre-Buddhist roots is essential. As demonstrated in many places around the world, archaeological conservation can also have positive economic spin-offs. Jobs are created for local people, and tourism can be promoted once the archaeological sites are properly secured.

— John Vincent Bellezza, Tibetanist, Shang Shung Institute; Member, Bon Translation Project, Oxford University; Visiting Scholar, East Asia Center, University of Virginia.

For overview information on these sites see "Bringing to Light the Forgotten: Major Findings of a Comprehensive Inventory of Pre-Buddhist Sites in Upper Tibet (Tibet Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China). Conducted between 1992–2002." *Athena Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2003). See also web articles at asianart.com, zhangzhung.org and ligmincha.org. A forthcoming book, *Calling Down the Gods: Spirit-mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Traditions in Upper Tibet*, deals with recent textual and ethnographic findings. ■



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