

IN THE VALLEY OF THE
EAGLE

*Zhang-zhung, Kyunglung, and the
Pre-Buddhist Sites of Far Western Tibet*

BY MARK ALDENDERFER AND HOLLEY MOYES

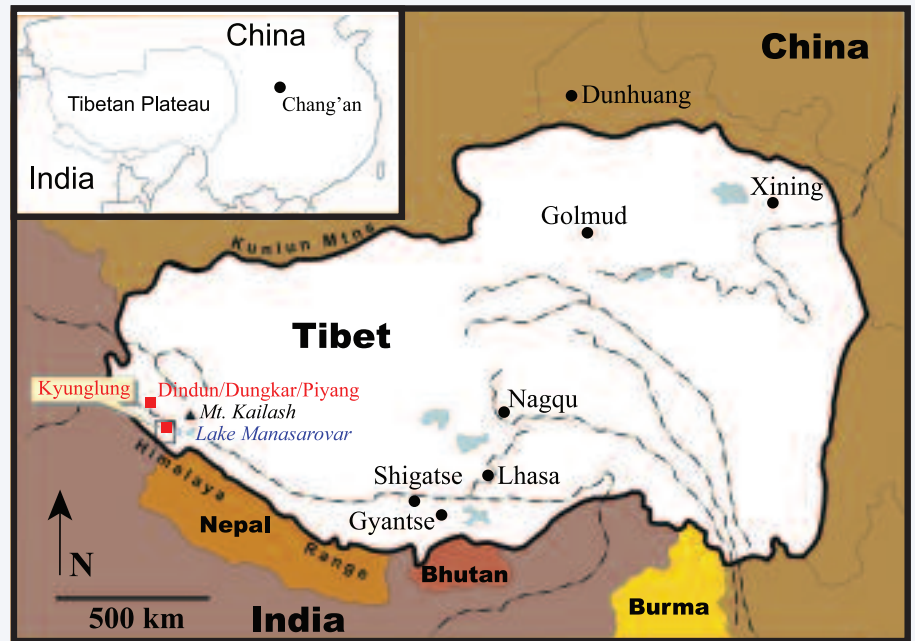
At the beginning of the 6th century AD, the rulers of the Yarlung clan on the central Tibetan plateau met with other clan chiefs in the region to commit to a secret alliance. By sacred oaths, they pledged never to quarrel or to seek personal advantage and always to support one of their number as the emperor. Most importantly, they also renounced their vassalage to a despised overlord, who was himself a vassal of Zhang-zhung, a shadowy polity which ruled much of the Tibetan plateau.

Over the next 25 years, these leaders of an emerging central Tibetan state defeated their overlord and destroyed the power of Zhang-zhung itself. In due course, they created the Tibetan Empire, which came to control the entire plateau, the Silk Route, many of the trans-Himalayan valleys surrounding the plateau, and briefly, western China and the capital of the Tang dynasty, Chang'an (modern Xi'an). The first ruler of this empire, Songsten Gampo (AD 605–650), introduced Buddhism to the plateau as a minor court religion. Later, after a second introduction in the 11th century, it would evolve into a powerful ecclesiastical institution that rivaled the power of subsequent emperors and other secular rulers of Tibet.

WHAT WAS ZHANG-ZHUNG?

History suggests that Zhang-zhung was a powerful and wealthy polity—a politically independent society—centered on its reputed capital, Kyunglung, located in the high desert of far western Tibet. Legends and fragmentary history speak of its origins in migrations from the west into the Zhang-zhung homeland, possibly during the 1st millennium BC. In support of this, paintings found in caves and ruined temples depict aspects of the material culture of its rulers and religious figures that have been interpreted as “Iranic” in origin. Based on fragmentary texts reportedly from Zhang-zhung, its language was most probably of Indo-European origin. Its political organization remains unclear. Some have characterized it as a small-scale coalition of territorially based lineages, while others suggest it was a chiefdom, a petty state or kingdom, a confederation, or possibly an empire. Even its extent has been disputed, with some arguing for a vast, nebulous polity that incorporated areas to the northeast and beyond.

Little is known about Zhang-zhung to the world beyond its borders, and archaeological and historical evidence is scarce. What is known suggests that Zhang-zhung once controlled much of the western Tibetan plateau, including the area around the sacred Mt. Kailash, as well as many of the trans-



Holley Moyes (map), Mark Aldenderfer (below)

WORKING IN THE TIBET AUTONOMOUS REGION

For most of his career, Mark Aldenderfer has focused on the high Andes of South America, studying the earliest inhabitants of the region. One of his long-term goals was to study the Tibetan plateau and compare the adaptive strategies of its earliest inhabitants with those in the Andes. In 1997, after an almost decade-long odyssey, Mark became the first Western archaeologist granted permission to work in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1997. Holley Moyes became the first Western graduate student to do so in 2001. Our Chinese colleagues, Huo Wei and Li Yongxian of Sichuan University in Chengdu, have been working on the plateau since the early 1990s, and are among the handful of experts on Tibetan prehistory.

The initial collaboration was directed toward the discovery of the architectural and material manifestations of the *phyidar*—the second diffusion of Buddhism onto the plateau. The first attempt to establish Buddhism came to a halt when the Tibetan Empire fell to its enemies in the mid-9th century. The second diffusion in the 11th century was stimulated by Indian sources and originated in far western Tibet. It was sponsored by the emerging rulers of the Guge polity, which rose to regional dominance after AD 1000. Research centered on two sites, Piyang and Dungkar, and sought to examine the archaeological evidence for the construction of Buddhist religious architecture and the establishment of monastic institutions. Most of the research was devoted to mapping, excavation, and limited regional survey.

The Buddhist site of Piyang-Dungkar, with Old Piyang, a temple built just prior to AD 1000, in the foreground.





A typical domestic structure with double walls excavated at Dindun.

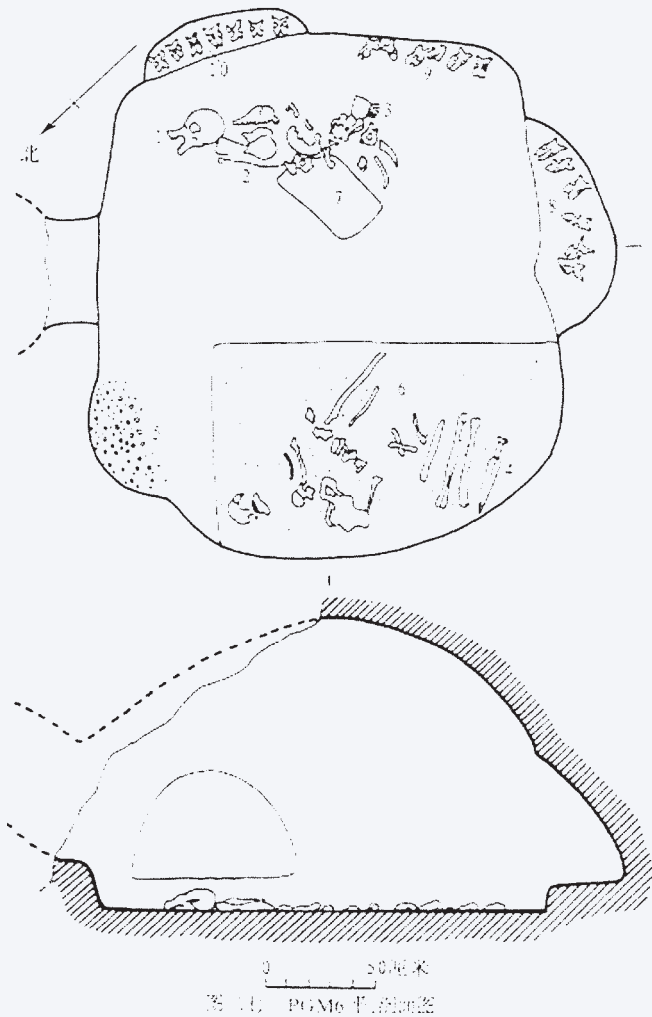
Himalayan valleys. Zhang-zhung appears to have acted as an important intermediary for trade and the diffusion of knowledge between the central Tibetan plateau and the Indian subcontinent to the south, and Sogdiana, Persia, and the Hellenistic world to the west. Perhaps of greater importance, Zhang-zhung is thought to have been the home of Bon—a religion that dramatically influenced the evolution of Tibetan Buddhism. Zhang-zhung seems to have played an important role in Central Asian prehistory and history, but beyond these vague outlines, it remains a mystery. To understand the evolution of political complexity on the Tibetan plateau and unravel some of these historical debates, systematic archaeological research in the Zhang-zhung heartland is required.

DINDUN: A ZHANG-ZHUNG VILLAGE

In 1999, while mapping a 14th-15th century AD Buddhist-era mortuary site called Dindun, a series of depressions surrounded by tumbled stone walls were discovered that were wholly unlike Buddhist-era habitation sites. One of the depressions had been looted, exposing a series of prepared floors, a hearth, and faunal remains. A charcoal sample recov-

ered from the hearth was dated to *ca.* 150 BC—at this time, the earliest radiocarbon date from western Tibet. This was well before the Buddhist era and within the conventionally accepted times of Zhang-zhung! For the first time, the possibility existed for archaeologists to study Zhang-zhung—a notion both daunting and exciting.

But there were some challenges to overcome. The first was the exploratory nature of archaeological excavation in this area. Aside from surface collections of ceramics, there were no other systematically excavated contemporary archaeological sites in the region with which to compare the materials recovered from Dindun. Also, while Dindun may have fallen within the conventional time frame of Zhang-zhung, there was no guarantee that its inhabitants were actually subjects of the Zhang-zhung polity. Continuing research in 2001 therefore focused on unearthing archaeological data that could help determine the cultural affiliations of its inhabitants. To do this, our Chinese colleagues chose to work at two nearby cemeteries that we suspected were affiliated with the village, while we directed excavations at Dindun itself. Fortunately, both mortuary data from cemeteries and residential evidence of house form, content, and organization are among the most valuable



The shaft tomb excavated at a cemetery near Dindun. Courtesy of the China Tibetology Institute, Archaeology Department of Sichuan University and Bureau of Cultural Relics, Tibet Autonomous Region (from a "Brief Report of a Tentative Excavation of Ancient Tomb Groups in Piyang-Dongga Site of Zhada County in Tibet." *Kaogu* 6 (2001):14-31).

sources of information that can help unravel aspects of cultural identity in the past.

For example, in central Tibet, residential buildings are generally large, two-storied structures with corrals and animal pens on the ground floor. In contrast, Dindun's residential buildings were much smaller, free-standing, single-storied, rectangular structures. Here, open spaces between structures formed corrals. These buildings were frequently semi-subterranean and often had internal divisions and rooms. Hearth and kitchen areas containing barley seeds and animal bone were consistently found in the houses' southwestern corners, and differences in room number between buildings suggested differences in the size, wealth, and status of their occupants.

In the cemetery, a number of tombs were excavated and two were radiocarbon dated to 600–300 BC. In general, the ceramics found in the tombs were similar to those found in the village, establishing a clear link between the two. Two tomb

types were identified: one characterized by relatively small, rectangular stone-lined tombs, and the other consisting of rectangular and ovoid forms lacking stone walls and foundations. It is unknown whether these tombs had at one time been covered with mounds of stone. One cemetery contained a shaft tomb that may have been the burial of a higher-status individual. Unique in the region, the person buried in the shaft tomb was accompanied by a bronze dagger, some iron objects, and a disarticulated horse. In general, the contents of the other tombs indicated gender and wealth differences between individuals.

One of the most interesting finds at Dindun was the discovery of standing stones, called *rdo-ring* in Tibetan. Thousands of these in various shapes and sizes are scattered across Tibet and the trans-Himalayan area. At the beginning of the 20th century Tibetologist M. J. Bacot introduced them to the West when he identified a "megalith" in eastern Tibet. Since then, other explorers in western Tibet and the Chang Tang (the vast high elevation desert to the north of the central plateau), such as George Roerich during his Central Asiatic Expedition (1925–28), have discovered archaeological sites with standing stones. These Tibetan menhirs, cromlechs, and alignments have strong affinities to those found across North and Central Asia and dating from the Bronze Age to historical times.

The standing stones at Dindun, however, were discovered in unique contexts. The stones are phallic in form, and aside from modifications to the tip and general shaping, they have no inscriptions or illustrations upon them. They appear singly and not in groups or sets, and are located within the structures of higher-status or wealthy individuals, or at the boundaries of the village where they may have been placed within rectangular enclosures.

Taken together, this evidence gives us a sense of life in a small village in the presumed heartland of the Zhang-zhung polity. Life was fairly simple. Dindun's inhabitants grew barley and herded sheep, goats, and yak. There were differences in wealth, indicated by differences in house size and contents, as well as people's treatment upon death. Although no obvious religious structures were found, ritual, as symbolized by the standing stones, was important to the villagers.

KYUNGLUNG IN THE VALLEY OF THE EAGLE

In the summer of 2004, our team turned its attention to the presumed Zhang-zhung capital, Kyunglung. The site is located on the south side of the Sutlej (or Langchen Khabab) river at the confluence of three major streams about 80 km northwest of the present shore of Lake Manasarowar. Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci explored the area in 1935 and recorded a number of Buddhist-era cultural remains, including a temple, chapels, various *chortens* (mortuary monuments), other struc-



The lowest terrace atop the mesa has scattered structural remains.



Looking north at the Kyunglung mesa.

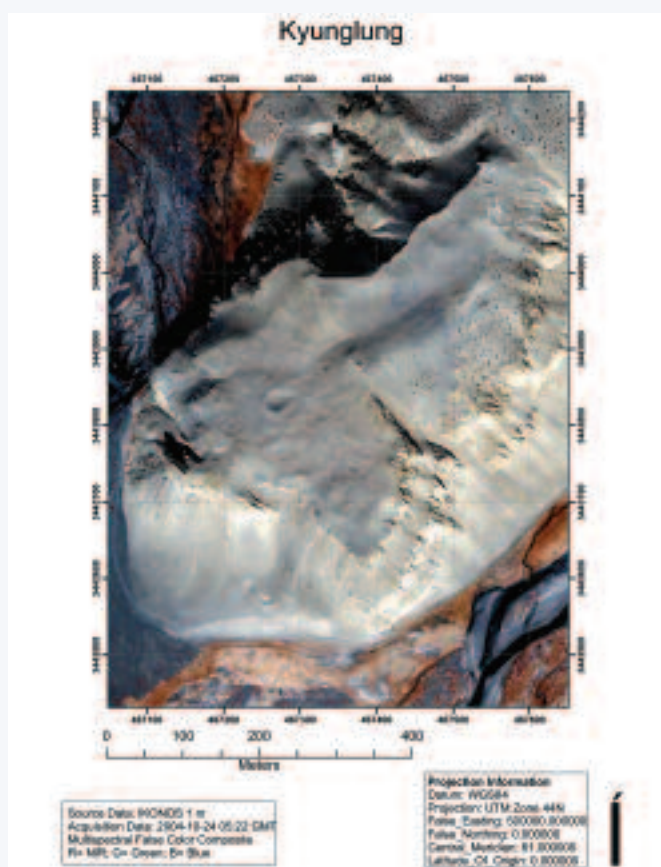
tures, and caves. He also identified a large number of sites in the vicinity of Kyunglung that he considered “pre-Buddhist” in age. These included villages, large residential complexes, “megalithic” remains, and a number of *chortens* he suspected were of great antiquity. Although he did not describe these in any detail, we were intrigued.

We quickly confirmed that there are two “Kyunglungs.” One is the complex of Buddhist architectural remains found in a

narrow gorge of the Sotlej near an active hot spring. The other sits 15 km upriver, atop a high, massive mesa at the confluence of three streams. The valley floor here is 4200 m above sea level and the mesa rises 150 m above it. Its slopes are steep, but access is possible from the south up a narrow, winding trail.

Kyunglung in Tibetan means “Valley of the Eagle,” and once atop the mesa, this name and its strategic significance becomes obvious. The mesa top offers clear and unobstructed views of the three surrounding valleys, and from its peak on clear days one can see far to the east the sacred mountain Kailash—central to both Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu belief. The mesa top is circled by the remains of a wall and apparent battlements at regular intervals, and two round bases of probable watchtowers are located at a point where at least two of the surrounding valleys can be seen simultaneously. Despite the lack of natural water sources atop the mesa, there can be little doubt that Kyunglung was formidably protected and defended.

The mesa top is divided into three major sections or terraces. The lowest terrace is the largest and widest. Scattered across it are the remains of numerous buildings. Many wall foundations are visible on the surface and a few structures have walls standing greater than one meter in height. Most of the structures are rectangular in form and many have obvious internal subdivisions. They are very similar to the domestic structures excavated at Dindun, although there are differences. In one of the structures excavated by our Chinese colleagues, the rectangular plan is maintained, the hearth or kitchen area is found in the southwestern corner, and an internal bench is present. The midden just outside the kitchen wall contained large numbers of animal bones, including yak. Attached to some of these rectangular structures are circles and ovals of different sizes which probably served as corrals for horses, sheep, goats, and yak. Most of the buildings on the lowest terrace appear to be domestic or residential in



A number of structures can be seen on this Ikonos satellite image of the Kyunglung mesa and its surroundings.



A possible religious structure sits on the lowest terrace.



The modern Bonpo shrine sits on the middle terrace atop Kyunglung.

THE BON RELIGION

Even the experts are not sure what Bon is. According to Bon histories, it is the oldest religion in the world, originating over 16,000 years ago. Seen by its adherents as an expression of “universal truth,” Bon was introduced to Zhang-zhung from a semi-mythical homeland called Tazik. It served as the court religion of the Zhang-zhung polity, enjoying royal patronage. According to Per Kvaerne, a leading scholar of Bon, the religion focused upon the sacred person of the king and the maintenance of his well-being. It was also greatly concerned with funerary rites and the passage of the soul into the afterlife. Animal sacrifice, as well as elaborate mortuary offerings, figured prominently in these rites. Proper treatment of the dead was thought to ensure benefits and fertility for the living.

Features of Bon religious practice apparently persisted in the court of the early Tibetan Empire. The most likely material expressions of this belief system are the large mortuary mounds of the Tibetan kings found in the Chongye valley to the east of Lhasa and near the ancestral home of the Yarlung clan. Buddhism gradually replaced Bon as the state religion of the Tibetan Empire. After AD 1000, during the reintroduction of Buddhism to the plateau, Bon reorganized and took on a canonical and monastic orientation similar to the four existing sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

One of the goals of our project is to understand the material manifestations of the influence Bon had on the development of Tibetan Buddhism. However, the material record of that incorporation is currently nonexistent. To address this problem, we searched for public architecture at Kyunglung that may have served a religious or ritual purpose.

function—possibly occupied by members of the ruling lineage, their servants, and retainers.

One low rectangular mound oriented east-west, however, may have served a public religious function. Standing atop it, one looks west down the Sutlej river—directly into the fiery, setting sun. Aspects of early Bon religion are said to have been associated with the worship of the sun, fire, and light. Our Chinese colleagues excavated this mound and discovered a series of low, stepped platforms. Buried in one of these was a small bronze statue of clear pre-Buddhist design and motif. Unfortunately, no other artifacts indicating function were recovered. What role the platform played in religion is unclear but provocative.

The middle and upper terraces have a different range of structures. A modern Bonpo shrine sits on the high ridge that marks the southern edge of the middle terrace. Its construction has damaged a larger and earlier structure that may have been a public building. Few other structures are found on this terrace.

The upper terrace appears to be the focus of elite activity. None of the typical domestic structures seen on the lowest terrace are found here. At the very north end of the terrace, on the site’s highest point, there sits a simple, but large rectangular building with a number of niches. A number of platforms and staircases lead up to this structure. Based on its location, size, and the use of larger, shaped stones in its construction, we believe that higher-status individuals may have lived here and that the complex served as the court and residence of the “ruler” of Kyunglung.

Is Kyunglung truly the Zhang-zhung capital? We do not know, but its domestic architecture is similar to that found at Dindun. Although Kyunglung is clearly far more complex and diverse, there seems to be a connection between the sites. Research on the pre-Buddhist sites of western Tibet is still in



The most complex architectural remains at Kyunglung are found at the very peak of the site, marked by modern prayer flags.

its infancy, and we feel privileged to have the opportunity to be some of the first Westerners to investigate this area. We are also honored to have had the opportunity to collaborate with our Chinese colleagues, and we look forward to our continued work in future field seasons. 🏠

MARK ALDENDERFER is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. His primary research interests include the archaeology of foraging societies, the emergence of persistent leadership strategies, and the origins of social inequality. His methodological interests include geographic information systems and the development of digital approaches to archeological fieldwork. He has done fieldwork in a number of places in North America and Mesoamerica, but he is especially interested in high-elevation archaeology, and has worked on each of the world's three high plateaus—Ethiopia, the Andes, and Tibet. His current Andean research concerns the expansion of agricultural technologies in the northern Titicaca basin.

HOLLEY MOYES is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at the University of Buffalo. She is interested in the influence of ideology on societal changes and specializes in the archaeology of religion and the use of caves as sacred space. She has conducted field research in Israel, the American Southwest, Mesoamerica, and

most recently Tibet. Her dissertation research is on Chechem Ha Cave, an ancient Maya ceremonial site in Belize, Central America. The project has provided her with the opportunity to develop new methodologies for examining ritual frequency over time and the relationship of ritual to ecological and social changes.

For Further Reading

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The authors and their Tibetan friends at Piyang.

Holley Moyes (top), Nyingchajia (bottom)