

Mapping Early Buddhist Sites in Western Tibet: Recent Findings from Tsamda County, China

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In this article, I present recent field survey findings of early Buddhist sites in Ngari or western Tibet during August 2006. The sites are in the core region of the former Guge kingdom [Fig. 1], and date from the 10th to 13th century Second Diffusion of Buddhism period, known in Tibetan as the 'Chidar' (*phyi dar*). This survey of abandoned temples and cave murals at several locales

in Tsamda county of Ali prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region is designed to study the spatial patterns of newly discovered sites in relation to the better known sites of historical importance. In this way, it may be possible to deduce approximately how many sites probably lie in the canyons of Ngari awaiting detailed documentation. Historical Tibetan records do not contain maps, and

so it is often difficult to locate early temples listed. Also, many smaller shrines and cave murals are not recorded in the surviving historical records, and it is thus necessary to survey areas to document sites.

Interest in western Tibet has tended to focus on the region's historical importance in spearheading the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, and the

iconographic origins of Tibetan Buddhist art. Western scholarship largely started with the expeditions and findings of the noted Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci (1933). His interests were similar to those of Sir Aurel Stein who earlier explored ancient Buddhist sites along the Silk Road during the first decades of the twentieth century. In both cases, these early archaeological and art

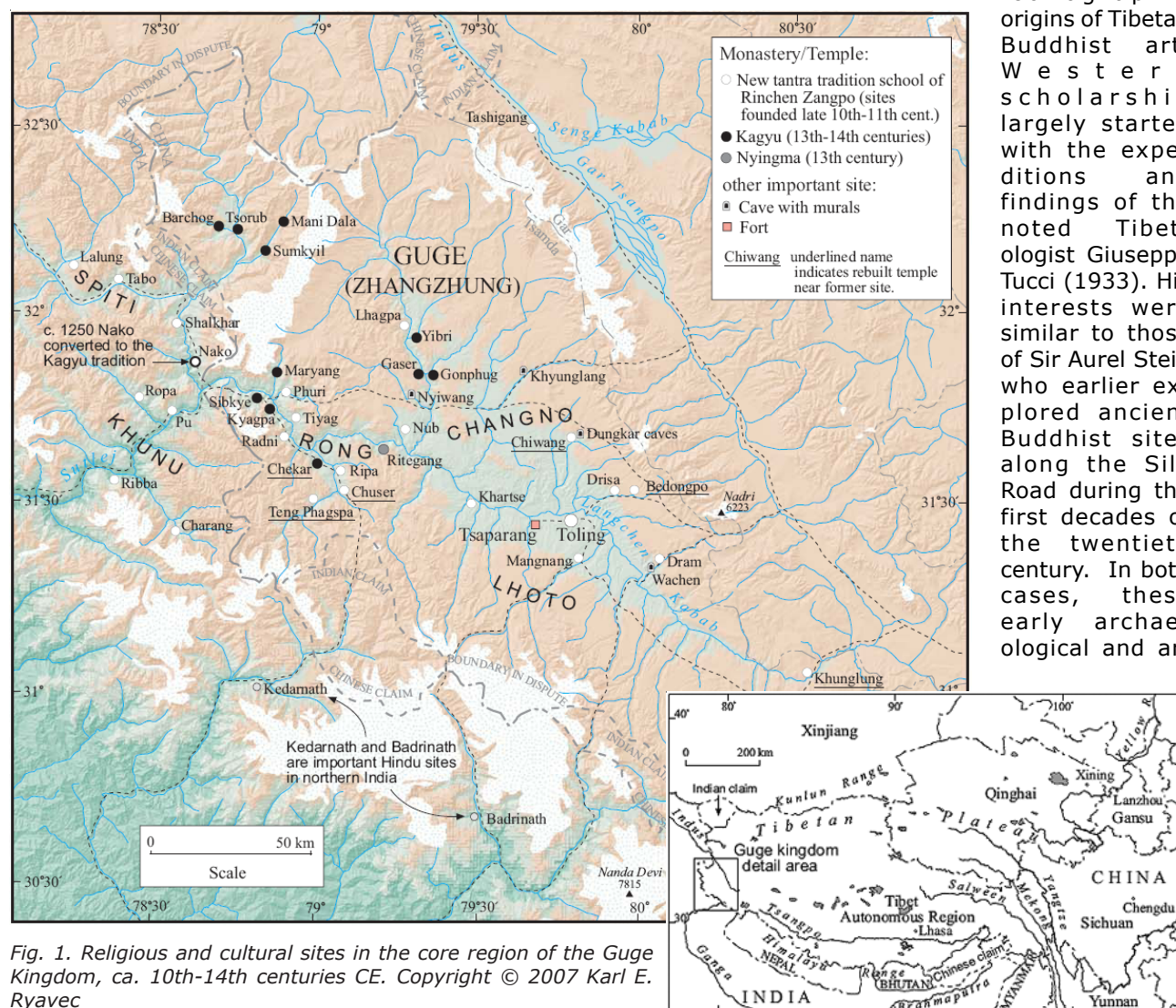


Fig. 1. Religious and cultural sites in the core region of the Guge Kingdom, ca. 10th-14th centuries CE. Copyright © 2007 Karl E. Ryavec

history surveys revealed a region desiccated by climate change over the past two millennia with numerous settlement areas abandoned due to dried-up irrigation sources. Recently, archaeological investigations of western Tibetan pre-Buddhist and Buddhist sites have commenced under collaborations between the American archeologist Mark Aldenderfer (2001, 2004), and the Chinese archaeologists Hou Wei and Li Yongxian (Hou and Li 2001) of Sichuan University. And I have studied the aerial extents of ancient abandoned farmland in several canyons of the former Guge kingdom based on 2-foot resolution satellite imagery, and made some preliminary findings on likely historical population levels (Ryavec 2005).

Tsamda county lies in the heart of the canyon country of southwestern Tibet carved by the Sutlej river of the Indus watershed, and bordered on the south by the Himalayan frontier with India. This region contains many ancient acropolis fort sites, some probably dating from the first millennium BCE Iron Age. Also, the terrain abounds in habitable caves. Traditionally, many people lived in caves especially during the cold winter months. Under the Tibetan empire ca. 7th to 9th centuries, western Tibet was annexed and referred to as Zhangzhung. The indigenous Bonpo religion remained strong while Buddhism seems not to have made any inroads, unlike in Central Tibet where it was fostered as a court religion of the emperors. Little is known of this past period, with studies by a small number of specialists referring to Zhangzhung in terms ranging from a coalition of territorially based lineages to group of kingdoms, and an empire (Bellezza 2003). However, most scholars agree that the Zhangzhung capital was located at Kyunglung on the eastern border of Tsamda county where the Sutlej river originates on the Tibetan

Plateau west of sacred Mount Kailash. After the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the 9th century, the new Guge kingdom that arose in the 10th century was sometimes still referred to as Zhangzhung.

It is not clear what sort of broader cultural influences may have interacted with the historical development of Zhangzhung during the pre-Buddhist period. The nearest major cultural hearth in this part of the world was the Harrapan, or Indus valley civilization that flourished c. 5000 – 2000 BCE, long before available archaeological evidence pertaining to Zhangzhung appeared. What impact the urban Harrapan culture may have had on historical developments in western Tibet is speculative at best, as outlined by Geoffrey Samuel (2000). Furthermore, George van Driem (1998) postulates that the northern Neolithic culture of Kashmir (2500 – 1700 BCE), much closer to western Tibet, represents a colonial exponent of the north China Majiayao Neolithic culture (ca. 3900 – 1800 BCE). Van Driem aptly points out that this provides

an explanation for the fact that Tibeto-Burmans inhabit both sides of the Himalayas, the greatest natural land barrier on earth. Certainly it is reasonable to assume these settlements in the upper Sutlej River valley had an agrarian base long before Buddhism arrived, but some time after the historical domestication of the important grain crop plants of wheat and barley in the Middle East about 10,000 years ago. According to J. P. Mallory and Victor Mair (2000), the weight of circumstantial evidence for the early settlement of eastern Central Asia during the Mesolithic period indicates western origins. In addition to the cultivation of cereals, archaeological evidence for the domestication of sheep also favors this western origin hypothesis. The extent to which western Tibet was geographically connected with these early diffusions and later trading networks requires further detailed interdisciplinary research.

Most of the Buddhist monasteries in western Tibet were built under patronage of the western



Fig. 2. The acropolis fort complex above the present-day village and monastery of Mangnang. Note the numerous caves of the former residents. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.



Fig. 3. Mangnang village, and ca. 11th century temple complex. Himalaya frontier between Tibet and India in background. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.

Tibetan Guge dynasty (ca. 10th to 17th centuries CE), which became instrumental in supporting a

Yet almost every canyon in the county has an ancient acropolis fort complex that saw the addition



Fig. 4. Ca. 12th century ruined statue of a Buddhist deity, approximately 4 m tall, on the top of the Mangnang fort complex. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec

resurgence of Buddhist art and literature. During this period many acropolis fort sites were re-developed to accommodate temples. In fact, the former Guge capital at the fortress of Tsaparang is the main destination of most tourists going to Tsamda county today, and is described in detail in guide books to western Tibet.



of Buddhist temples during the 'Chidar' period. Buddhist monks also painted cave murals as they did throughout the Silk Road region.

New Sites

The acropolis fort complex [Fig. 2, facing page] above the village of Mangnang [Fig. 3] contains a ruined temple with an approximately 4 m 12th-century Buddhist statue still largely intact [Fig. 4]. Mangnang is well known as the site of an 11th century temple where the famed Bengali Buddhist master Atisha was invited to stay one year ca. 1043 before traveling to Central Tibet where he passed away. Available guidebooks to Ngari make no mention of this important surviving statue in the fort above the Mangnang village temple complex.

Bedongpo village lies in a small tributary of the Sutlej at approximately 4,200 m. Ruins of a fort/monastery complex tower above the village [Fig. 5]. Historical records show that the monastery of Bedongpo was a branch of the main monastery of Toling constructed in 996 CE during the beginning of the Buddhist period in western Tibet. Various other ruined temples are also found in the Bedongpo valley,

Fig. 5. Ruined ca. 12th century fort/temple complex above the village of Bedongpo. Note small new Buddhist temple at foot of site. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec



Fig. 6. Drisa fort complex with ca. 12th century chorten. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.

but only near the village was a small temple rebuilt after China's political and economic reforms in Tibet during the 1980s. About 2 km downstream from Bedongpo is a relatively unknown site called Drisa [Fig. 6]. Numerous chorten dating from circa the twelfth century lie on the valley floor below an extensive complex of caves and an acropolis fort. Traces of red pigment on the walls of at least one of the ruined fort buildings indicate possible temples. No traces of houses, however, are noticeable, indicating that the former farmers probably lived year-round in the caves. The entire valley here below Bedongpo village consists of large tracts of abandoned farmland, also indicated by a surviving chorten near the edge of an ancient field [Fig. 7].

The Khyunglang cave [Fig. 8] contains 3 walls with surviving

circa twelfth-century murals [Figs. 9, 10, facing page]. There are some other caves in the valley, but ladders are required to access



Fig. 7. Ca. 12th century chorten and abandoned farmland in the Bedongpo valley. Note the numerous caves of the former residents. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.

them. The Khyunglang cave lies about 5 km upstream from Shangtse fort, the reputed summer capital of the Guge kings.

Conclusion

Tsamda county contains many surviving

early Tibetan Buddhist forms of art and architecture relatively unknown except to a handful of specialists. The area's importance as one of the core agrarian bases of the kingdoms of Guge and Purang starting in the tenth century led to royal patronage for substantial temple construction.

There are several problems, however, that make it difficult if not impossible for scholars and tourists to visit most of these sites. In recent years, tourists to Tsamda county have generally only been granted access to the main temples at Toling in the county seat, the nearby fort and temples at Tsaparang, and the Dungkar caves and fort easily accessed from the main road into the county. Chinese border security concerns place most of the other sites off limits, ostensibly due to sensitivity about the locations of military bases and patrols. China might do well to learn from its neighbor India, which now allows scholars to travel within 1 km of its claimed border



Fig. 8. Entrance to the Khyunglang cave. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.



Fig. 9. One of the three c. 12th century mandala murals in the Khyunglang cave. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.

with China. But China, unlike India, has to deal with its citizens attempting to flee the country. Thus the wider off-limit areas on the Chinese side reflect, in part, a method of preventing people from getting close enough to the border to walk into India. A second

concern relates to efforts by Chinese cultural offices preventing photography at the sites. This problem could be easily solved if those scholars who have already taken high-resolution photos (and official Chinese-sponsored surveys have already done this) made

them freely available. This would then make it possible for more people to visit the sites without the need to take photographs of the murals, as complete images would already be available.

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Fig. 10. Detail of a Guge warrior in one of the three c. 12th century mandala murals in the Khyunglang cave. Photograph copyright © 2006 Karl E. Ryavec.

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Han Lacquerware and the Wine Cups of Noin Ula

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Lacquer work is today recognized as one of the centrally distinctive components of Han material culture (206 BCE–220 CE). What's more, the Former Han period (206 BCE–8 CE) has come to be celebrated as the apogee of Chinese lacquer art (see Wang 1982, 80–99; Prüch 1997; Fuzhou 1998; Barbieri-Low 2001; and Li 2004 for further reading on Han lacquer). These insights are relatively recent and entirely the result of archaeological discoveries. Precisely a century has passed since the first archaeological discovery and identification of a lacquer vessel from Han China. In the spring of 1907, while surveying the Han border fortifications north of Dunhuang — and just weeks before coming upon the sensational medieval library at the Mogao Caves — Aurel Stein dryly

recorded his historic find, a wooden ear cup with scroll ornament from the ruins of a Han command center (Stein 1921, Vol. 2, 645; Vol. 4, pl. LII). Since Stein's discovery, and especially over the past forty years, archaeologists have unearthed thousands of Han and even pre-Han lacquer artifacts, several hundred of which are fortunately still in fine condition.

We now know that the use of lacquer as a protective, water-proof coating made from the sap of the lacquer tree (*rhus verniciflua*) goes back to Neolithic times in China. But as an artistically emancipated craft, lacquering came into its own only in the late fifth century BCE in the state of Chu in southern China. From that time on it was the preferred means of decoration for

all types of wood-based artifacts, whether vessels, boxes, furniture, musical instruments, arms, chariots, or coffins. By the Qin (220–206 BCE) and early Han eras, lacquering had become so prominent a craft that certain vessels were even produced as 'pure' lacquer artifacts without a wood substrate, using instead lacquer-drenched ramie fabric to build a core.

As a commodity, lacquer work was in many respects akin to woven silk during the Han era. Both had relatively little intrinsic material value. Made from renewable resources, silk and lacquer products, unlike artifacts made of jade and gold, were valued primarily on the basis of their design and manufacture. This meant that they could be made to cater to a relatively broad spectrum of the population. Plain silk fabric and utensils simply varnished in raw brown lacquer were widely available and essential commodities. But patterned silks with complex weave structures and glossy, colored lacquers with artfully painted red and black decoration