

“Eat it up or throw it to the dogs?” dGe ’dun chos ’phel (1903–1951), Ma gcig lab sgron (1055–1153) and Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (d.1117). On the disposal of corpses of “holy beings” in Tiebtan Buddhism: the last nine hundred years

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From archeological and historical evidence an important rupture or transformation in Tibetan funerary rites appears to have taken place sometime between the “Fragmentation of Tibet”, Bod gsil-bu’i dus skabs (ca. 842–978), and the initial period of the “Latter Diffusion”, Phyi-dar (late 10th- early 12th c.). The ancient practice of burial in individual or collective tombs and tumuli, for people from all walks of life, known from hundreds of sites all over the Tibetan plateau from paleolithic times onwards, disappears. In its place, diverse means of disposal of the body come into practice, described according to the elements: earth, water, fire and air, with the last two predominating, respectively, for religious masters and ordinary people.

This transformation indicates a radical shift in patterns of belief and attitudes towards life and death and the human body, associated with Buddhism and its fundamental tenets of the composite nature and the impermanence of all phenomena. While fire burial is consistent with Indian practice, air burial, which comes to dominate Tibetan society right down to the present day, is not known in other Buddhist societies, and may be most closely associated with Zoroastrian rites, prevalent in Sogdiana at a time when the Tibetan empire was at its greatest expansion. Mummification is another important practice also used for religious hierarchs.

This paper explores various factors that might have contributed to the diversification of funeral rites in Tibet over the last thousand years, with precise examples taken from literary and oral sources, and from empirical evidence, particularly with regard to some of the most well known religious masters.