

## Archaeological excavations at a pre-Buddhist residential site in far western Tibet

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In this paper I report upon excavations at Dindun, a site located on a high terrace overlooking the Blackwater River and between the modern villages of Piyang and Dungkar, Ngari, Tibet Autonomous Region. Testing in 1999 and more extensive excavation in 2001 has revealed the presence of residential architecture dating to approximately cal 85 BC (2065 M 60 rcybp). Although the site has been somewhat disturbed by a series of chortens constructed during the Buddhist period, it is likely that a small village of at least ten distinct structures was once present. Much of the site is covered in varying depths of wall collapse, but wall foundation courses can still be traced on the surface. The structures discovered at the site are generally rectangular, and are quite variable in the number of internal rooms present. Some are very simple, with only a single room and associated features, whereas the largest structures on the site have multiple internal rooms. Although it is not clear at present why this variability exists, it is likely to be due to variation in household size or composition, age of household, or differences in wealth. Despite this variability, feature type and placement are similar in the structures: one corner of every structure has a probable kitchen area, which includes a large, stone-slab lined hearth filled with burned soil and ash, and small stone storage chambers and boxes located in different parts of the structure. This, plus the relatively homogenous ceramic assemblage, suggests that we are looking at a single cultural tradition at Dindun, and not a series of reoccupations of the site by different peoples. In general, small structures have very few artifacts of any kind associated with them, whereas larger ones have more complete ceramic assemblages and other artifacts, like ground stone tools. The largest structure, which contained multiple rooms, had a unique feature present in a chamber at its western end: a stone stela (Tib. *doring*). Although pushed over, the stela had been placed in a rock-lined seat. No artifacts were found within this chamber. The stela itself was almost two meters in length, and made from a local stone. Although no carving indicative of art or language was found upon it, modifications clearly shaped it into a phallic form. A similar phallic stela was found on the eastern side of a site within a small rock feature that might once have been a small room or chamber. Burned offerings of barley and other vegetable matter were associated with this stela. These stela are clearly part of ritual and religious practice that was once performed at the site, but their exact function is unknown. Similar phallic stela are known from other parts of western Tibet and the trans-Himalaya, but this the first time they have been encountered in a true residential complex. This paper will explore the possible interpretations of this cultural pattern in the light of the antiquity of the site.