

The territorial delimitation of the pre-Buddhist Zhang Zhung paleocultural entity

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In this paper, I will delineate the territorial extent of the pre-Buddhist paleocultural zone traditionally known as Zhang-zhung, by examining the geographic distribution of its monumental remains. Using a comprehensive inventory of pre-Buddhist archaeological sites conducted in Upper Tibet (traditionally known as Stod and Byang-thang) between 1992–2002, this paper will provisionally establish the cultural frontiers of Zhang-zhung. The assemblage of monument typologies in Upper Tibet with their highly distinctive morphologies and design traits serve as an index for gauging the areal configuration of pre-Buddhist culture. In particular, the unique pillar typologies of Upper Tibet distinguish Zhang-zhung from the archaeological heritage of adjoining regions.

An important tool of verification for this archaeological methodological approach is literary in nature. In general or schematic terms, the extent of the Zhang-zhung kingdom as recorded in religious histories (*chos 'byung*) corresponds to the archaeological record. For example, the 12th century *mKhas pa'i lde'u* states, "At the juncture of Tibet and Gru-gu (Uighur territorial entity) there were the five *stong-sde* (communities/divisions of one thousand) of Upper Zhang-zhung....At the juncture of Tibet and Sum-pa (regions in eastern Nag-chu prefecture) there were the five *stong-sde* of Lower Zhang-zhung...". The same type of overall geographic arrangement is also maintained by the various Bon *btsan 'byung*, but with the *stong-sde* administrative unit often being replaced by the *khri-sde*.

The ethnohistorical frontiers of Zhang-zhung as established by the comprehensive archaeological inventory are given below. However, borderland regions that fall under the jurisdiction of adjacent countries are not included. The limited archaeological evidence available indicates that the Byang-pa region of La-dwags, sPi-ti in Himachal Pradesh, as well as sLe-mi, Mu-gu, Dol-po and 'Om-lo, in Nepal, shared very close cultural affinities with Zhang-zhung.

I. Western delimitation:

- 1) Ru-thog to the border with La-dwags.
- 2) Gu-ge to the border with Himalayan India. Zhang-zhung may have existed in association with other cultural influences in this region because of the widespread incidence of mud brick and rammed earth monument types rarely found in other areas of Upper Tibet.

- 3) Pu-rang. However, the archaeological evidence for Pu-rang smad is inconclusive at this time. It would appear that many of the pre-Buddhist sites were effaced in this agricultural enclave by historical Buddhist resettlement.

II. Southern delimitation:

- 1) Himalayan watershed as far east as Dar-rgyas-gling township, Sa-dga' county. It remains to be determined if sections of sKyid-grong county, to the southeast, were also an integral part of the Zhang-zhung ethnohistorical entity. According to Bon tradition (sLop-dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam-dag's *bstan 'byung*, etc.), sTag-mo rdzong of Mang-yul was one of the six main fortresses of Zhang-zhung.

III. Eastern delimitation:

- 1) gZhung-smad and Ma-g.yo townships, Shan-rtsa county. Areas to the east formed a distinctive but related cultural zone as evidenced by the archaeological record, which is mostly funerary in nature. The eastern Byang-thang region, which extends as far east as Bar-tha township, gNam-mtsho and A-mdo county, corresponds to areas in the Sum-pa paleocultural domain. Interestingly, the Zhang-zhung and Sum-pa ethnohistorical frontier is also a contemporary linguistic watershed between the Hor and sTod *skad* dialects. Far eastern regions of Byang-thang (eastern Nag-chu county, Sog and gNyan-rong) have very scant monumental remains, indicative of far less developed sedentary cultures in the pre-Buddhist period.

IV. Northern delimitation:

- 1) Across the breadth of the Byang-thang west of dPal-mgon county. Except for certain tomb typologies, the Zhang-zhung monumental record does not extend north of 34° north latitude.

On a morphological, locational and functional basis, pre-Buddhist archaeological sites in Upper Tibet can be classed as follows:

I. Monuments

- 1) Habitational structures occupying summits (fortresses, palaces and related structural remains)
 - a. All-stone corbelled buildings
 - b. Structures built with wooden rafters
- 2) Residential structures in other locations (religious and lay residences)
 - a. All-stone corbelled buildings
 - b. Other freestanding building types

- c. Buildings integrating caves and escarpments in their construction
- 3) Ceremonial stelae and accompanying structures (funerary and non-funerary sites)
 - a. Isolated pillars (*rdo-ring*)
 - b. Pillars erected within a quadrangular stone enclosure
 - c. Quadrangular arrays of pillars with appended edifices
 - 4) Superficial ceremonial structures (primarily funerary sites)
 - a. Single-course quadrangular, ovoid and irregularly shaped structures (slab-wall and flush-block constructions)
 - b. Double-course quadrangular, ovoid and irregularly shaped structures (slab-wall and flush-block constructions)
 - c. Heaped-wall enclosures
 - d. Rectangular mounds (*bang-so*)
 - e. Terraced structures
 - 5) Cubic-shaped mountaintop tombs
 - 6) Minor stone constructions
 - a. *Tho*
 - b. *Lha-gtsug, gsas-mkhar and rten-mkhar*

II. Rock Art

- 1) Petroglyphs
- 2) Pictographs
- 3) Inscriptions