# Variation in mortuary practice on the early Tibetan plateau and the high Himalayas

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The royal tombs at Phyong-rgyas and similar sites in central and eastern Tibet are rightly seen as the most impressive mortuary facilities anywhere on the plateau. But while widely known, they are hardly representative of the range of such sites. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of more humble tombs have been excavated on the plateau since the 1980s (Chayet 1994: 74; Huo 1995), and these range in date from the Late Neolithic through the end of the imperial period in the ninth century C.E., after which sky burial becomes the most common form of mortuary practice.

Although there has been a limited scope of archaeological research on the Tibetan plateau, it is apparent that there is significant variation in pre-Buddhist era mortuary practices.[1] Explaining this variability is a key research question in the prehistory of the region, and to that end, I will examine what is reliably known from archaeological research and selected historical sources to identify patterns and trends in mortuary practice that may be attributed to migration, the diffusion of ideas from other regions, or possible indigenous inventions. I will focus upon three themes or trends that characterize mortuary traditions until the imperial period: the transformation of telluric facilities to tumuli and mounds, the appearance of animal remains within the tombs, and the treatment of the remains of the dead.

Three regions are included in this comparative study: central Tibet near Lhasa, far western Tibet, and the Northwestern Himalayas, including Ladhak in India and Upper Mustang in Nepal (Figure 1), although I will also bring in relevant comparative data from other areas that surround the plateau. Within each geographic region, I

[1] Some explanation of the term 'pre-Buddhist' is required. I use the term to mean what it says—archaeological materials from the plateau that can be reliably dated to a time frame that precedes the material evidence of the appearance of Buddhist religious practice in central Tibet around the mid-7th C. C.E.. Given that the archaeological record of the plateau is so poorly understood, it is difficult to assign meaningful terms to those remains that might be more familiar to historians, Tibetologists, and practitioners or scholars of Tibetan Buddhism or Bon.

examine sites that have good chronological control, either dated directly by some chronometric method or cross-dated by comparisons of mortuary architecture or tomb contexts with sites that do have good control of time. Although I acknowledge this may lead to the exclusion from consideration of important data such as that collected by John Bellezza (2002) in his important research on the Byang Tang as well as most of the sites described by luminaries such as Roerich, Tucci, and others, I justify this restriction by simply noting that without control of time, it is difficult to develop robust inferences about cultural practices. Only continued research will bring sites described by these explorers into a more secure cultural and temporal framework. Finally, I will also make a concerted effort to avoid unreasonable speculation about how observed patterns of variation in mortuary practice in these three regions can be associated with Bon, Zhang Zhung, or some other social, religious, or political formation. As more data are accumulated, it may be possible to relate the specifics of mortuary practice to one of them, but at present, such associations are difficult to support.

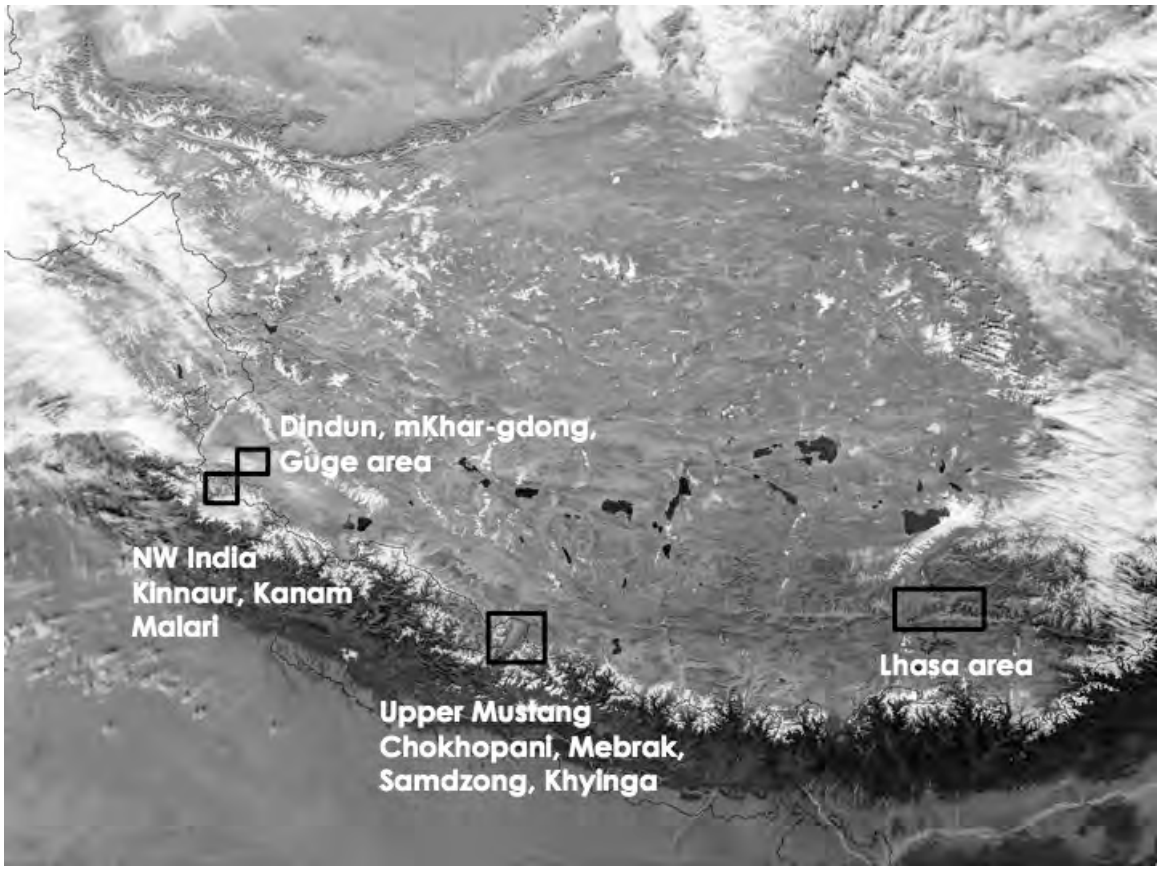


Figure 1

## Telluric burial

There is a deep tradition of telluric (below-ground) burial on the Tibetan plateau that stretches back to the Late Neolithic. The earliest evidence for this mortuary practice comes from Chugong (Chin: Qugong), a site located 5 km north of Lhasa (Institute of Archaeology 1999). The site appears to have been a small village, and although heavily disturbed by local people who mined the site for soil, it offers important evidence for a Neolithic-era occupation of the central plateau. A mortuary component consisting of 32 tombs is found approximately 300m to the northwest of the village. Three tombs thought to be intrusive and dating to a later period have also been discovered in the village component.

The initial occupation of the site begins around 1700 B.C.E., and ends around 1100 B.C.E.[2]. The tombs are square-to-rectangular in form, lined with stones along the interior walls, and are irregularly capped or covered with stones. The floors of the tombs are natural soil. The depth of the burial chamber of these tombs varies from 30-60 cm, and the tombs do not protrude above the ground surface. Tomb M111, dated to 1598-1055 B.C.E., is a good example of the square variant (Fig. 2a).

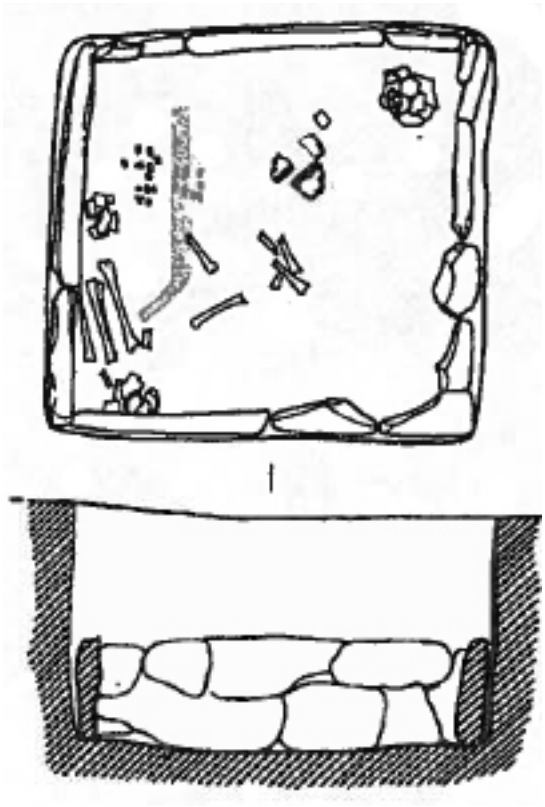

Figure 2a. Tomb M111, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 20)

All four sides of the tomb are lined with stones, and irregularly shaped stones form a cap. Tomb M203 is a good example of the rectangular type with all four interior walls lined with stones (Fig. 2b).

[2] The investigators list a total of eight radiocarbon assays, three of which have been rejected by the excavators as being too late and not associated with the village occupation (Institute of Archaeology 1999: 233, Table 3). One of these (Zk-2560) dates a tomb (M103) to 758-401 B.C.E.. See Aldenderfer and Zhang (2004: 31-32 and Table III for a discussion of the dating of the site.

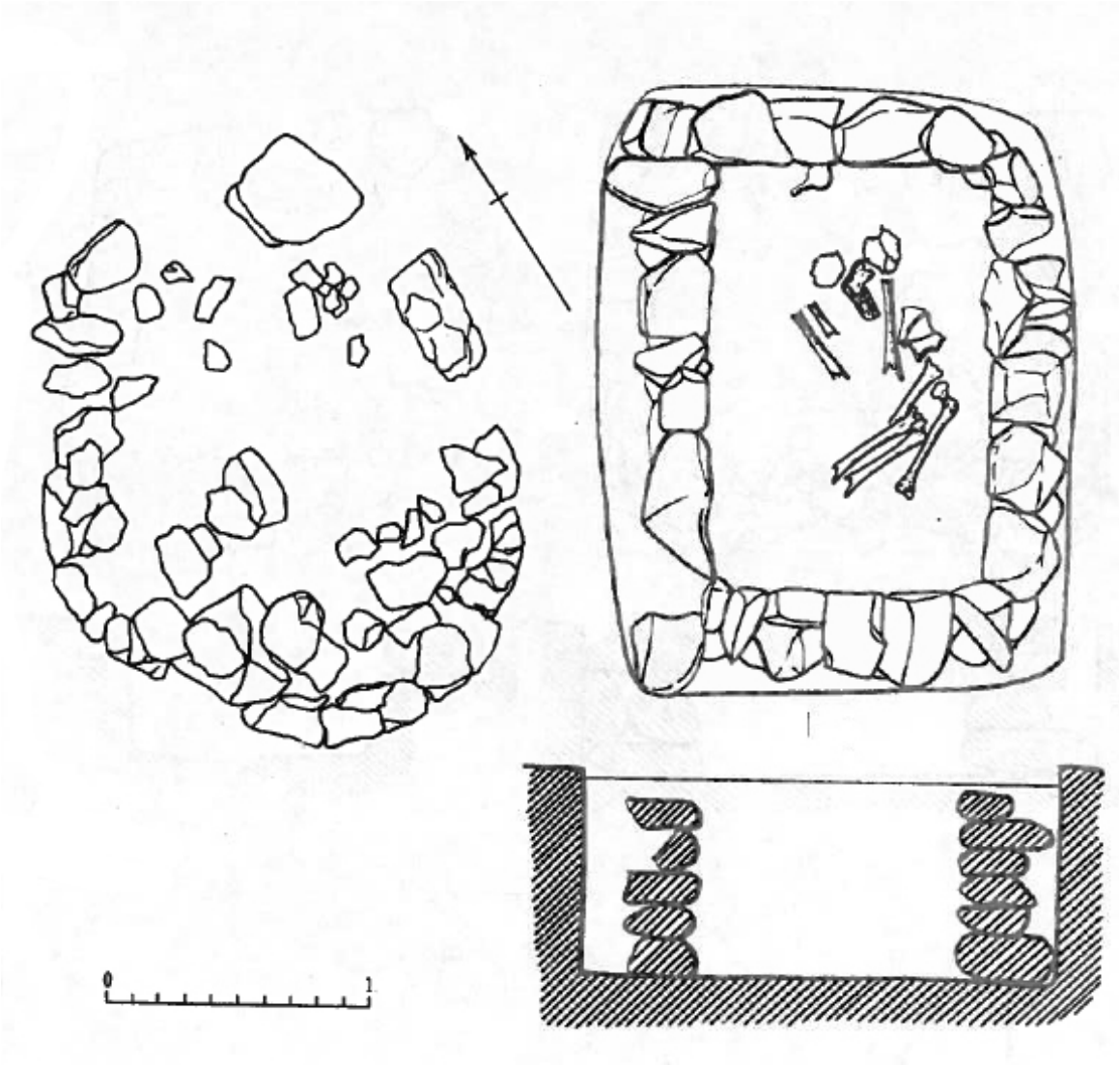

Figure 2b. Tomb M203, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 199). Scale bar is 1 m.

In contrast, Tomb M207 is much simpler, with only a single wall lined with stones (Fig. 2c).

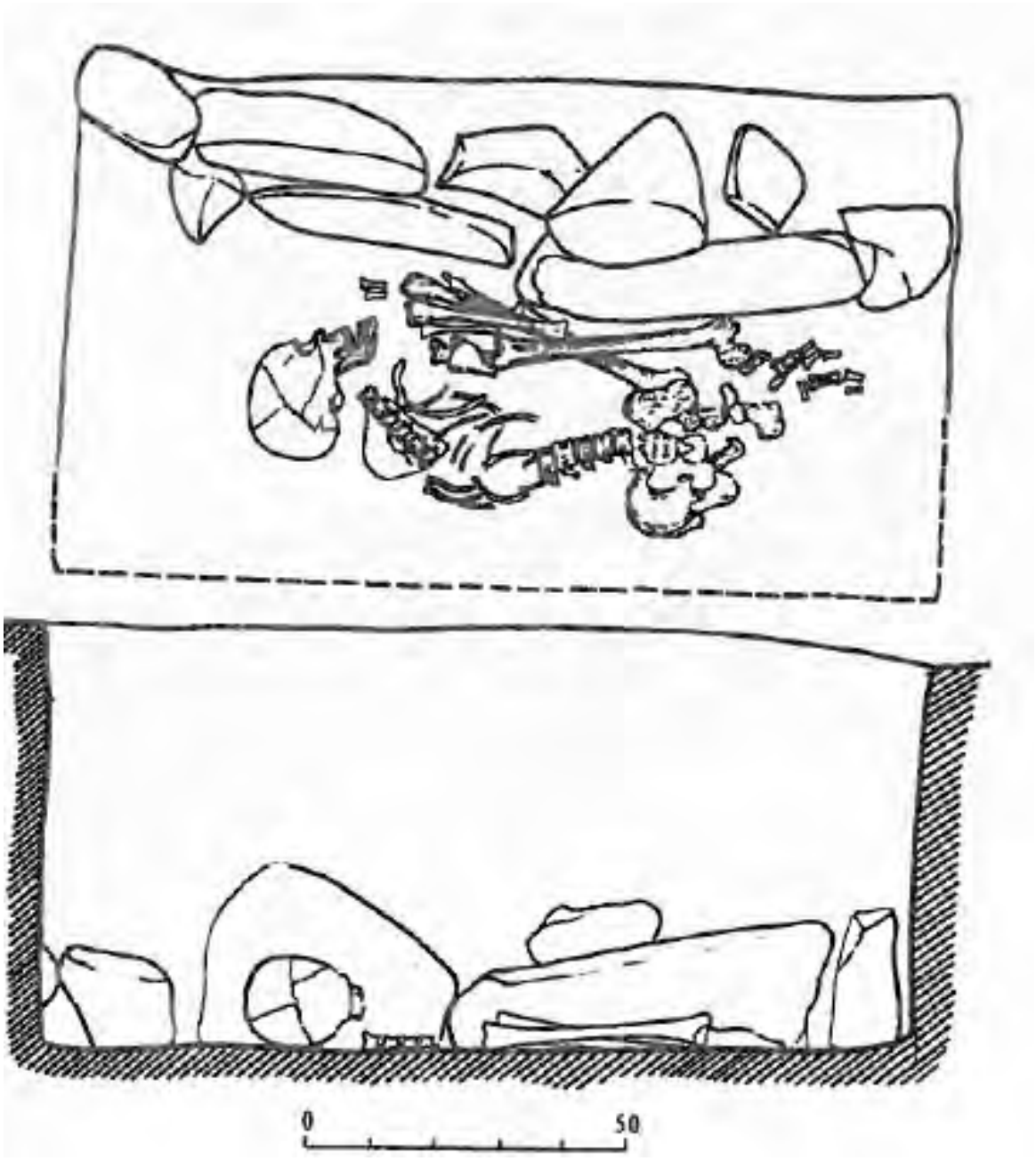


Figure 2c. Tomb M207, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 194). Scale bar is 50 cm.

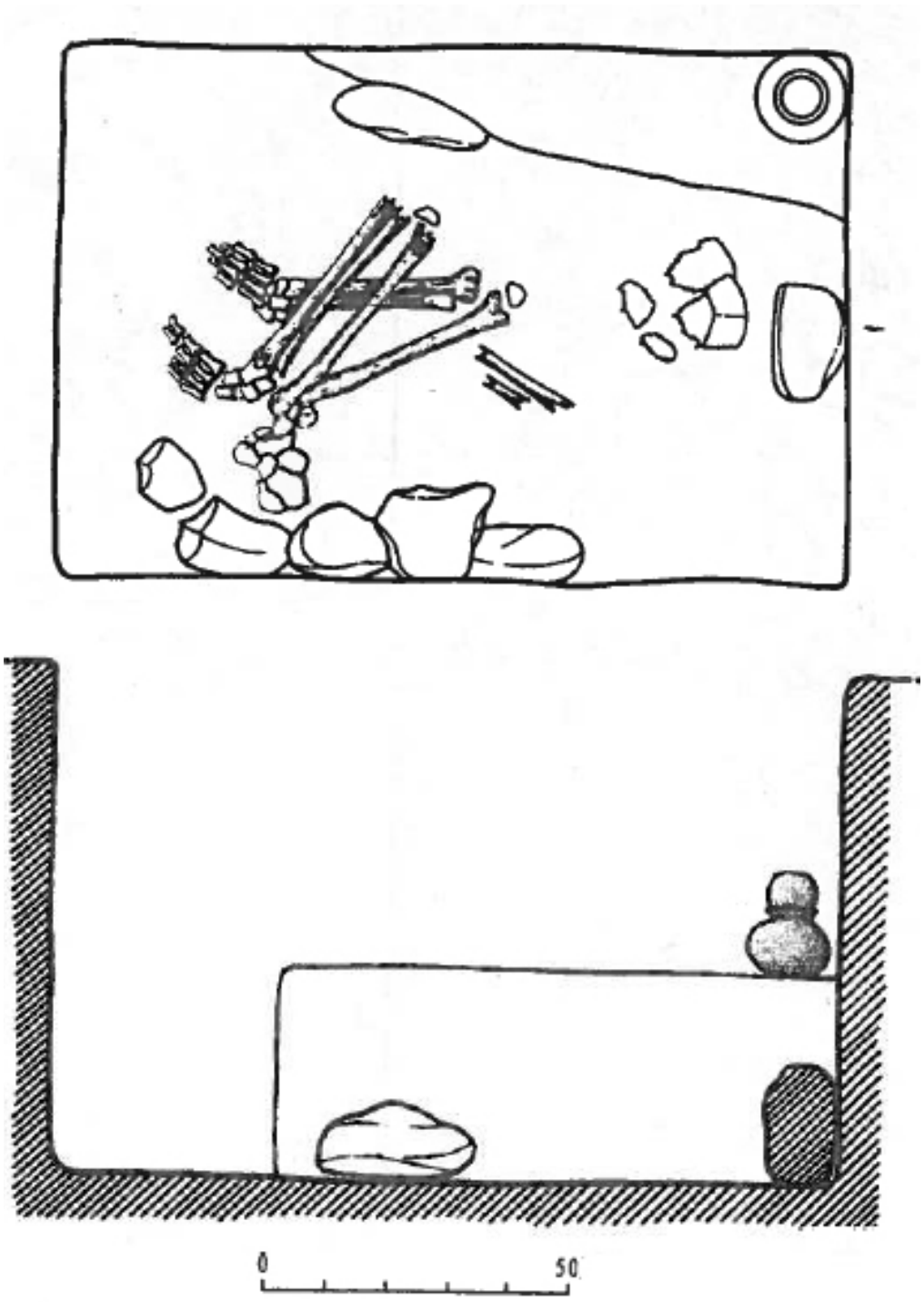


Figure 2d. Tomb M105, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 195). Scale bar is 50 cm.

Some tombs, like M105, have small, low benches within their walls, and in a few instances, have small, empty niches that jut from them (Fig. 2d). Note that this tomb is not rock lined, and is simply an excavated pit.

The mortuary facilities at Chugong are quite different from somewhat earlier as well as contemporary mortuary traditions found in extreme northeastern Qinghai and Gansu. There, a sequence of three well-defined and dated Neolithic period archaeological cultures have been observed: Majiayao (3400–2800 B.C.), Banshan (2800–2300 B.C.), and Machang (2300–2100 B.C.). Two Bronze Age cultures— Quijia (2600-1600 B.C.E.) and Xindian (1600-500 B.C.E.) are also known from the region. Most sites of these five cultures have cemeteries associated with them, and the style of mortuary facility in the Neolithic era sites is generally of an excavated rectangular tomb that contained a wooden coffin most often in a trapezoidal form (Chayet 1994: 52-53). Quijia cemeteries are similar; they have rectangular pits that contain hollowed tree trunks as coffins. In some instances, the tombs are large enough to have narrow passages that lead into them and which are reminiscent of very shallow shaft tombs (Chayet 1994: 61). Finally, Xindian cemeteries are composed of circular cist tombs; this culture is believed to have moved into the western reaches of Qinghai from northern China and appears to represent a break in mortuary tradition in the region.

Although there is other evidence for telluric burial dating to the Neolithic period on the plateau, due to a lack of radiometric dating, it is difficult to be fully confident in the assignment of these tombs to this period. Two Chinese archaeologists—Huo (1995) and Xiage (1998) have attempted to systematize these data for the central and southern parts of the plateau. Despite these efforts, clear patterns are not obvious. Tombs assigned to the Neolithic are described as "stone coffins," are square or rectangular in form, and are made either with large flat slabs for walls and floors, or coursed, uncut stone used to construct walls. An uncommon, more complex form is said to be a stone cyst tomb with an entrance, tunnel passage, and central chamber (Huo, 1995). Some of these tombs, especially those in the vicinity of the Neolithic site of Karou in far eastern Tibet, are thought to have originated from migrants to the plateau of people from the adjacent, lower elevation valleys on western Sichuan (Tong, 1978). In short, while tombs are in abundance on the plateau, they currently contribute little to our knowledge of the Neothlic because they have not been systematically dated.

Telluric mortuary facilities are also common in western Tibet and in the northwestern Himalayas but date somewhat later in time. Perhaps the best known of these facilities are the famous "cave tombs" of Upper Mustang in Nepal. Three archaeological phases defined primarily by tombs and their contents have been defined: Chokhopani (1000 B.C.E.-450 B.C.E.; Simons, Schön, and S. Shrestha 1994a, 1994b, 1998; Schön 2001; Schön and Simons 2001), Mebrak (400 B.C.E.-50 C.E.; Alt et al.

2003), and a third period, yet unnamed but best exemplified by the site of Samdzong, which dates from the 3rd through the 7th century C.E. (Aldenderfer 2010). Although these sites have been described as caves, they are actually shaft tombs. In effect, they are chambers excavated from the ground surface to varying depths. In general, these tomb complexes were created along the face of ridgelines and would not have been visible to passers-by. However, by earthquake or erosion, the façade of the chambers was destroyed, thus exposing the tombs to the face of the ridge (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The tomb complex at Samdzong. Note the "cave tombs" in the façade of the cliff face.

A similar mortuary tradition is found in far western Tibet. Tong (2011) reports the discovery of shaft tombs near Mkhar gdong near the modern village of Kyunglung along the upper reaches of the Sutlej River. In this case, chambers were excavated on relatively flat earth instead of along cliff faces. These tombs were not marked by tumuli or other markers, thus making them essentially invisible to passers-by. Li (2011) reports on a similar shaft tomb mortuary context, labeled the Quta cemetery, near Tsaparang in far western Tibet. Others (Center for Tibet Studies 2008; China Tibetology Institute 2001a, 2001b) also describe a series of shaft tombs from the Gelintang cemetery, which is located in far western Tibet near the important Buddhist-era sites of Piyang and Dungar. Although these sites have not been dated directly with a chronometric method, cross-dating of ceramics found in the tombs with ceramics from the nearby Dindun habitation site, places these shaft tombs from ca. 500 to 100 B.C.E. (Aldenderfer 2007; Aldenderfer and Moyes 2004). Unlike the other shaft tomb complexes in western

Tibet, the Gelintang cemetery has an above-ground manifestation described by Huo Wei and his colleagues as a "maze." It consisted of a single course of angular cobbles shaped in a roughly spiral pattern. The pattern is said to be unique in western Tibet, and although a function is not obvious, it has been interpreted as a locus of sacrificial activity.

Finally, shaft tombs are known from two areas on the southern flanks of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand at the Malari site, which is dated to ca. 100 B.C.E. and in Himachal Pradesh at the Kanam site from ca. 500-100 B.C.E. (Bhatt 2011; Nautiyal 2011). These tombs are placed along the very steep slopes above a series of river courses, and in this way are quite similar in placement to those found in Upper Mustang. Like those tombs, the Indian tomb complexes are not visible on the ground surface and are only exposed in the modern era by construction and erosion of the context in which they are found.

Singh (2003) reports on the discovery of cist burials in the Kinnaur district in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in the Sutlej River drainage. The site, at 3000 m in elevation, was discovered accidentally, and only limited rescue operations were conducted. A single cist tomb was opened, and human remains were discovered along with fragments of a bronze goblet. These cist tombs are circular, lined with undressed stone, and range in depth from 50 cm to 1 m. Aside from being circular in shape, they show no other obvious similarities with the tombs from Dindun. No chronometric dates were run on any associated materials, but the author speculates that the site may range in date from 500-200 B.C.E. based upon craniometric analysis of skulls recovered from the site when compared with those recovered from other sites and that have a secure dates. Tombs of this type are apparently common in the upper Sutlej and surround drainages, and Singh (2003:7), reporting unpublished conference papers, suggests that some consensus is beginning to emerge among Indian archaeologists that these tombs, as evidenced by biometric analysis of the skeletal materials found within them, reflect an 'Aryan' population that had moved into the region from the north. However, he also acknowledges that the data supporting this assertion are very sparse. Rectangular cist tombs are known from other locations in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh indicating a complex mosaic of burial practices in the region (Bhatt 2011).

Franke (1914) reports on cist burials from Leh. These are said to be stone-lined chambers up to 2 m in depth, and which contain in some instances large ceramic vessels in which disarticulated human remains had been placed. The crania from these

tombs are said to reflect an 'Aryan' cultural affiliation, but it should be stressed that these materials have not been systematically studied.

Telluric burial appears to continue into the imperial period from the 7th through 9th century C.E., but the character of telluric burial begins to change dramatically. Although stone coffin and cist burials persist (see Aufschneiter 1956 for an example), telluric burials are now accompanied by the construction of mounds or tumuli that house the dead. The construction of mounds appears to parallel the increasing social complexity seen on the plateau as the nascent Tibetan state begins to emerge. Visible tumuli signal prestige and power in many parts of the world, and certainly the most impressive examples of this emphasis on social power can be seen in the royal tombs at Phyong-rgyas. However, cemeteries with large numbers of smaller mounds spring up across the plateau as the Tibetan state begins to exert a greater level of control over the region. The telluric tradition does not disappear, however, but is literally embedded in the mounds themselves. Tumuli with underground chambers become common. In some instances, these mounds contain multiple chambers that likely housed ritual spaces or storage facilities for goods deposited with the dead. There is a long tradition in Tibetan studies of attributing the origins of this transformation of mortuary facilities to Central Asian and Indo-European sources. Beckwith and Walter (1997) assert, using cultural similarities and linguistic analysis, that there is evidence of Indo-European cultural practices on the Tibetan plateau as early as 2000 BCE. These are followed by Indo-Iranian influences from 500-300 BCE. In their view, these practices may have strongly influenced the construction of the early royal tombs. Caffarelli (1997: 233-239) argues that much of this new variability in mortuary facilities stems from widespread contact with Central Asia and China as the Tibetan state expands its geographic scope (see also Beckwith 2011).

However, there are some indigenous examples of mound construction that can be dated earlier than the appearance of the large cemeteries of tumuli of the imperial period. For the most part these mounds are found in western Tibet, especially in Ngari, and are composed of small, low platforms constructed of angular stones. Two cemeteries, Langbuqin and Sasongtang, both located near Piyang and Dungar, provide some insight into these constructions (China Tibetology Institute 2001a, 2001b). Between the two cemeteries, more than 100 square-to-rectangular stone platforms were constructed, with most measuring no more than 2-4 m per side. A stone foundation was laid, and a small chamber excavated in the center of the rectangle. In some instances, the central chamber was constructed of embedded stones. Rocks were then piled atop the chamber to form a low mound now more than 20-30 cm in height.

Since most of the tombs were looted in the distant past, it is not possible to determine the true height of the constructions. Further to the west along the Sutlej River, larger stone platforms, in some cases measuring 5-6 m on a side, have been located near habitation sites tentatively dated between 500-100 B.C.E.. These platforms are low, no more than 30-40 cm in height and appear to be solid constructions. It is unknown if these platforms have central underground chambers like those near Piyang-Dungar. If this cross dating is accurate, it suggests two things: telluric burial began a transformation in western Tibet relatively early, and this region may have served as a possible inspiration for the appearance of mounds and tumuli burials in central Tibet at a somewhat later date.

## Items to accompany the dead, especially animals

Not surprisingly, there is considerable variation in the contents of tombs across the plateau. The Late Neolithic tombs at Chugong have almost nothing in the tombs aside from some human remains; only one-third of the tombs had other artifacts within them, and these were exclusively utilitarian ceramics (Institute of Archaeology 1999: 271). No other artifacts indicative of gender, occupation, or status were encountered aside from a single tomb that contained a bronze mirror thought to be of Central Asian origin. The dating of this tomb is controversial, but consensus is beginning to emerge that the mirror was likely made between 800-500 B.C.E. based upon a careful examination of stylistic motifs and its chemical composition (Huo 1994, 1997; Zhao 1994). If this dating of the mirror is correct, this find is not associated with the early occupation of the village site. Importantly, no remains of animals were found in any of the tombs of Chugong.

This lack of grave goods stands in stark contrast to earlier as well as contemporary cemeteries in northeastern Qinghai and Gansu at the margins of the Tibetan plateau. Painted ceramics, often in substantial numbers, are found throughout the Neolithic cultural sequence in Qinghai. One of the most famous of these sites is Liuwan, which has burials from both the Banshan and Machang traditions. A total of 257 burials of dating to the Banshan period were recovered, and tombs contained a wide variety of artifacts, including the famous Banshan ceramics, stone tools (both chipped and polished), bone tools, and some decorative objects, including turquoise, bone, and stone beads as well as stone bracelets. In the subsequent Machang period, a significant number of anthropomorphic motifs as well as geometrics that resemble

certain characters of early historic writing systems are found on the ceramics (Chang 1986: 150). Some mortuary treatments are impressive—one Machang burial from Liuwan had more than 90 highly decorated ceramic vessels. Finally, Qijia burials from the region contain large numbers of ceramics and utilitarian objects that reflect gender as well as status and wealth differentials. Of interest, however, is that as in the case of the Chugong burials, no remains of animals were found within the tombs of any of these cultures.

Tomb contents in the northwestern Himalayas, far western Tibet, and Upper Mustang are generally quite distinct when compared to those on the plateau. Tombs of the Chokhopani complex contained personal adornments, including copper earrings (or possibly amulets), ceramics that appear to be restricted to mortuary contexts, and utilitarian objects made of wood and stone. Musk deer teeth were also recovered, and the excavators suggest these were used in a necklace or other body decoration (Tiwari 1985). Finally, the presence of small copper sheets of unknown but presumably ritual or religious function appears to signal a connection to the Indian subcontinent. Similar artifacts with anthropomorphic shapes are commonly found in the so-called Copper Hoards of the upper Ganges river basin and which are said to be associated with the poorly-dated Ochre-Colored Pottery culture of this region (Lal 1951; Misra 2001: 512-513).

Animal remains make their first appearance in burial contexts in Upper Mustang in the Mebrak period (450 B.C.E.-100 C.E.). Alt et al. (2003: 1532) discovered the mummified heads of sheep and goat (13 distinct animals) as well as a complete disarticulated stallion. These remains were found scattered on the floor of the tomb. Other artifacts included glass beads from unknown sources, carnelian beads, textiles (cotton, linen, wool, and other plant fibers), bamboo mats, and personal adornments such as bronze bangles. The dead were placed on wooden platforms that reflect excellent control of wood carving, and in some instances, these platforms were painted with images of wild animals, including the now-extinct red deer and markhor as well as blue sheep (Alt et al. 2003: 1552). At Samdzong, animal remains become even more important as a significant contribution to tomb contents. At least 41 individual animals were recovered, and the species represented include sheep and goat (as well as a category of caprids, a term used when the faunal elements could not be distinguished), horse, and bovids (Eng and Aldenderfer 2011). The sheep, goats, and caprids were represented by skulls and portions of the post-cranial skeleton. Because of the collapse of the tomb ceilings, it is not clear if whole animals were brought into the tombs. However, in the case of Samdong 5, the tomb of a high-status individual, only the heads

of horses, caprids, and bovids were recovered. Other artifacts recovered from Samdzong include various copper, bronze, and iron implements, glass beads imported from Sassania (located in modern Iran), South India/SE Asia, and the Sindh, bamboo and wooden vessels, and copper or bronze personal adornments. A small piece of silk was also recovered; it is unclear as of this writing if it is of western or Chinese origin. A spectacular gold and silver mask was found in Samdzong 5 (Figure 4) as well as the remains of a wooden coffin that likely contained the remains of the high-status individual (Figure 5). The coffin is unique in that it portrays a scene of a figurative rider painted in orange astride a horse painted in a similar color. Finally, the scattered remains of a child aged from 8-12 years were found in the tomb.

Figure 4. Gold and silver mask recovered from Samdzong 5

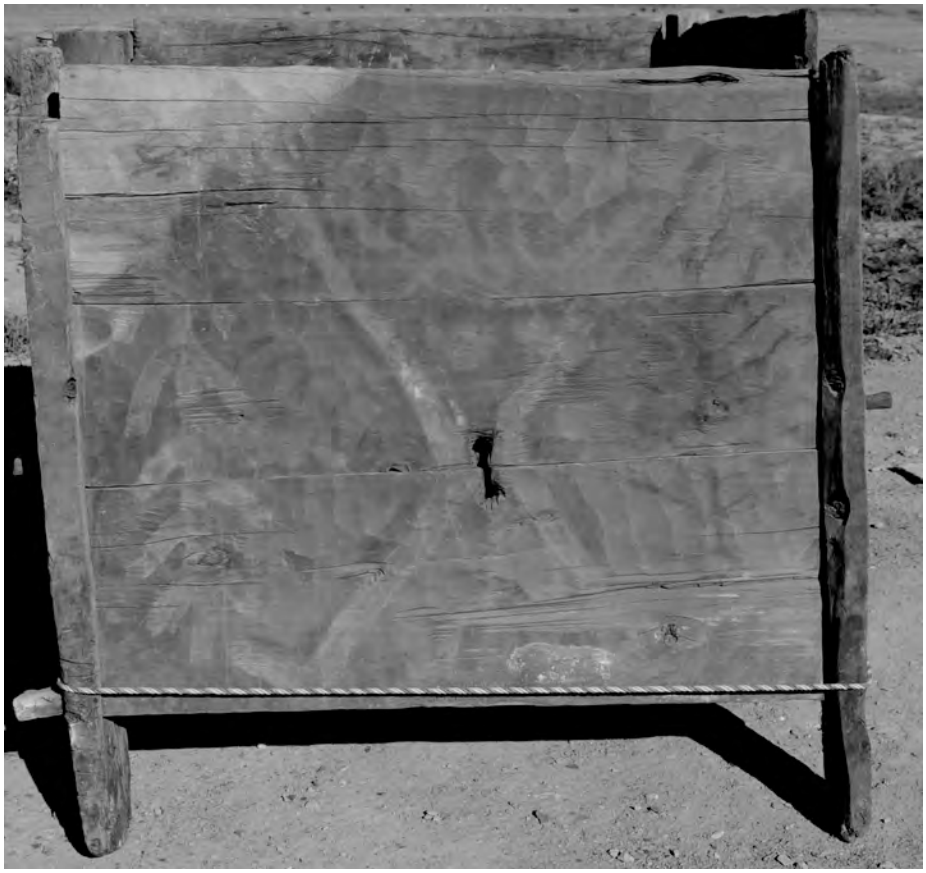

Figure 5. Wooden coffin from Samdzong 5

The content of the shaft tombs from western Tibet-- Mkhar gdong, Quta, and Gelintang—dated from 500 B.C.E.-100 C.E.--are quite similar to those found in Upper Mustang. Mkhar gdong and Quta have wooden coffins similar to those found at Samdzong, and contain utilitarian ceramics, some metal objects, wooden and bamboo containers, and a small number of animal skulls, primarily caprids. A beautiful gold mask, more elaborate than that found at Samdzong but broadly similar, was recovered from Mkhar gdong. The tomb at Gelintang is more complex, and contains a nearly complete horse as well as ceramics, metal objects (bronze/copper and iron), and wooden objects. No coffin was observed. Of note is the presence of what is described as a horse sacrifice pit near the shaft tomb that contained the horse. A disarticulated and incomplete horse skeleton was discovered. The soil around the bones was stained red with an unknown substance, suggesting that the bones and context had been the scene of a ritual interment (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 219). The excavators offered no explanation for this assertion.

The tombs from Malari and Kanam are similar; a gold mask similar to those found at Samdzong and Mkhar gdong was discovered at Malari along with ceramics,

some metal objects, and in one instance, a nearly complete skeleton of a bovid said to be a cross between a yak and cattle commonly found at lower elevations in the region (Nautiyal 2011). Other animals include dog, sheep, and goat. No wooden coffins were recovered from these tombs.

## Treatment of the dead

The treatment of the dead is an important aspect of mortuary analysis because understanding the processes involved with preparation of the dead for burial involves both practical and ritual dimensions. Social relationships among the dead may be revealed as well. It is sometimes possible to infer insights into attitudes and beliefs of the afterlife.

The human remains found within the tombs at Chugong include two instances of individuals in a flexed position with their knee tightly drawn to the chin and found lying on their side. The majority of tombs, however, contained mixed sets of skeletal elements deposited in no apparent pattern. Skulls are relatively uncommon in these tombs, and some have as many as two individuals placed within them. Few of the burials were intact upon discovery, suggesting that all burials were secondary in nature[3]. There is no evidence of intentional modification of the skeleton such as defleshing or dismemberment.

The Qinghai Neolithic sites show a limited range of variability. Almost all burials encountered in the Majiayao period were secondary, although some single individual tombs were encountered; these were almost always extended burials. In contrast, those of the following Banshan period were single extended individuals. However, some secondary burials were also present as well as collective burials with as many as seven individuals present. Finally, in the Machang period, the majority of burials encountered were recovered from collective tombs or secondary interments, with a very small number of single individuals. There is no evidence of additional processing of the dead at any of the Qinghai Neolithic sites. In the Bronze Age of the Qijia period, most burials were of individuals lying on their back and rarely, on their side. A few collective tombs

[3] Secondary burials are those that are likely to have been first deposited or placed in some other context immediately after death. Later, the remains are collected and redeposited in a new location. Skeletal elements are often lost or misplaced during this process. There are instances, however, in which some elements are used for ritual purposes. Secondary burials often appear jumbled or disarticulated when encountered. See Schroeder (2001) for an expanded discussion.

were discovered. Of interest is that some Qijia burials showed signs of limb amputation before death (Chayet 1994: 61). It is unclear, however, if this is an aspect of mortuary ritual or simply the interment of individuals who had lost their limbs in life.

At Sasongtang in far western Tibet, while many of the tombs had been looted at some point in the past, thus scattering the human remains that once may have been present, there is evidence of intensive burning and the accumulation of ash deposits within the tombs. The excavators of the site suggest these are "cremation tombs," but exactly what has been burned within these tombs remains an open question (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 205-209). It is plausible that the burning within these tombs represents a ritual act that did not use human remains.

Although human remains have been recovered from the tombs at Mkhar gdong, Quta, Kanam, and Malari, the context of each of these sites was badly disturbed, and thus it is difficult to be certain about the original placement of the remains within them. At the Gelintang tombs, however, it is clear that the burials found within the tombs are secondary in nature. Skeletal elements are jumbled, and there is significant variability in the types of remains present. The interments appear to be of single individuals, however. There is no evidence of processing of the remains (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 210-220).

The burials at Chokhopani and Mebrak in Upper Mustang are exclusively collective; in the latter, the dead were placed in a flexed position on their sides upon wooden platforms in the tomb. As the tomb was filled with more individuals, earlier interments were displaced and placed underneath the platforms and on the floor. The remains show no signs of defleshing or dismemberment, and the presence of various articles of clothing suggests that the dead were placed in the tombs with at least some clothing upon their person (Alt et a. 2003: Figure 3, 1532).

Although there are significant similarities in the treatment of the dead between Samdzong and the two earlier periods of prehistory in Upper Mustang, there are very significant differences as well. The most striking of these is the intentional perimortem (soon after death) defleshing of the dead. Eng (2011) and Eng and Aldenderfer (2011) have documented the frequency of cut marks across the 34 individuals recovered from the 10 Samdzong tombs, and have found that individuals of all ages and sexes had cut marks in different frequencies on their bones. Although the majority of cut marks were in locations indicative of defleshing, some (especially those concentrated on the proximal and distal ends of long bones) are perhaps indicative of some dismemberment of the corpse. Because of the disturbance to the context of the Samdzong tombs, it is

not possible to observe directly the way in which the dead were placed within the tombs. However, given the presence of wooden platforms similar to those at Mebrak, it is probable that the dead were placed upon and around them in a manner similar to that site. Although some pieces of fabric were recovered (especially from the high-status tomb of Samdzong 5), it is not clear if the dead wore articles of clothing.

## Discussion

The transformation of mortuary facilities over time on the Tibetan plateau and surrounding Himalayas is most certainly a combination of indigenous developments mixed with stimuli from other places in the region. Some of the transformations likely had religious motivations, while others appear to be more strongly motivated by social or political concerns.

The appearance of above-ground mortuary facilities—mounds or tumuli that may themselves contain tombs buried within them—is a clear response to growing social and political complexity across the plateau at the end of the Neolithic into the imperial era. The village-based Neolithic era burials in Qinghai and the central plateau show clear status differences as measured by the quantities of artifacts, particularly ceramics, found within them, but there is little evidence of larger political formations that competed for resources and territories at this time. By at least 600 C.E., small Tibetan polities were beginning to coalesce, and Tibet's "first tomb," that of Dri gum btsan po, the putative eighth king of the Yarlung dynasty, must have been created well before this date (Hazod 2007). There is a clear sense that the tombs of the earliest Tibetan kings were in the form of mounds or tumuli, although it remains unclear whether this was an indigenous invention or one stimulated by contact with other groups (Hazod 2007: 276). It is the case, however, that the tumuli took on a potent religious significance as the Tibetan empire began to solidify its control of the plateau and surrounding areas (Haarh 1969). Others have argued that mound construction, especially for the royal elite, was also tied to the extension of the indigenous mountain cult that may have existed in pre-Buddhist times (Karmay 1994). And as I have shown above, Beckwith and Walter (1997: 1039) argue for a Indo-Iranian origin of these tombs that in their opinion, likely dates to ca. 500 BCE. In contrast, smaller cemeteries with more humble, less imposing above-ground features, such as those characteristic of western Tibet, are likely to reflect foci of identity and memory as populations begin to grow. Their visible salience marks a sense of place for the local inhabitants as well as

for those passing through. In this way, they serve to mark boundaries and define territories.

The appearance of animal remains is relatively late on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas and is clearly related to the emergence and diffusion of pre-Buddhist ritual concepts (Stein 1971). Animal sacrifice is well known from much of the Bronze Age and later periods in Central Asia; the remains of horses, sheep, dogs, and yaks can be found in mortuary contexts throughout the region (Baumer 2012). Many rituals associated with these animals are attested in Old Tibetan documents. The horse as psychopomp, or spiritual guide for the king, is prominent in these texts, but sheep take on a similar role (Stein 1971: 490, n.41; Heller 2003).

The earliest known appearance of possible animal guides to the land of the dead is found in western Tibet at Gelintang (horse, caprids) and Quta (caprids) by ca. 500 B.C.E and in Upper Mustang at Mebrak (horse, caprids) by ca. 450 B.C.E. The tradition in Mustang continues well into the 7th century C.E. There seems to be little question that the ideas for this tradition in the western Himalayas comes from a northern or western source that remains to be fully defined and verified. Wagner (et al. 2011) show that complex, mounted pastoralists were present in Kazakstan, northwestern China (including what is today Xinjiang) and Mongolia as early as 1000 B.C.E. Sheep and goat as well as horse remains accompanied the dead in cemeteries associated with the sites of this culture. Recall that the burial masks found in Ladahk, Upper Mustang, and western Tibet also have similarities with those found at sites in Xinjiang and areas further to the west. It thus seems plausible that the tradition of spirit guides may well have diffused from culture complexes in these areas. Alternatively, the concept of spirit guides as an aspect of shamanic practice and ritual is well established in the ethnographies of most nomadic Siberian peoples (Waida 1983), and there is strong evidence for its deep antiquity (Rozwadowski 2008). It is thus possible that such ideas were present among earlier inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau and surrounding Himalayas (Müller-Ebeling, Rätsch, and Shahi 2002). However, the complete absence of animal remains in mortuary contexts before 500 B.C.E suggests that if such concepts were on the plateau before this date, they were replaced by other forms of religious practice, such as ancestor worship. The more likely alternative, however, is that the spirit guide concept came late to the region.

Is the spirit guide tradition an aspect of Bon religion? Although it is well known that much of what is seen as pre-Buddhist religious practice on the plateau had many shamanic features (Samuel 1993: 436-456), it is not easy to assign these practices to Bon

because of the extreme lability of the term. However, the spatial association of these funerary practices with the putative location of the Zhang zhung polity in western Tibet and the remnant centers of Bon practice in Upper Mustang are suggestive of such a relationship.

The most curious treatment of the dead in the region is the defleshing seen at Samdzong in after the 3rd century C.E. This has not been observed in any other plateau or Himalayan society, although defleshing and dismemberment are known from Iron Age (3rd-2nd century B.C.E, also known in this region as the Scythian period) southern Siberia (Mednikova 2000; Murphy 2000). It seems unlikely, however, that there is any significant connection between the practices observed at Samdzong and these earlier Siberian examples.

Elsewhere, Jacqueline Eng and I have argued that the defleshing at Samdzong may well be related to Zoroastrian funerary rituals. Such connections between Iranian practices have been anticipated by Kvaerne (1986, 1987). Here, I follow Heather Stoddard's (2009) examination of "décharnement" or defleshing in Tibetan sky burials, which post-date Samdzong by approximately 500 years, describes research conducted by Franz Grenet (1984), who identified apparent similarities between aspects of sky burial and the Zoroastrian practice of defleshing the dead and offering it to animals. Grenet showed that the practice spread eastward beginning in the 1st century C.E. Sky burial itself does not appear on the plateau or in Tibetan influenced areas before the late 10th and early 12th century C.E. (Stoddard 2009: 12). However, it is reasonable to consider the defleshing seen at Samdzong to be an early variant of this process, and one that became better defined and more common after the more secure establishment of Buddhism on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas. Stoddard (2009: 22) also suggests, however, that aspects of sky burial may well have been introduced into Tibet in the 11th century C.E. with the diffusion from India of the *gcod* ritual, which is concerned with the symbolic offering of one's flesh to the universe. It may be, then, that the defleshing at Samdzong is an early variant of the *gcod* ritual. The location of Samdzong along the major north-south route from the Indian sub-continent to the Tibetan plateau makes this suggestion particularly appealing.

## Conclusion

The period from roughly 1000 B.C.E to C.E. 500 on the plateau and surrounding regions is clearly a time of population movement, the diffusion of new ideas and belief systems,

and the growth of social and political complexity. The shift from telluric burial characteristic of the Neolithic to the creation of above-ground, visible tumuli or mounds can be best explained by reference to anthropological theories of the establishment of place, connection to ancestors, and the development of a more robust sense of identity that tied more closely people to a landscape. The subsequent shift to alternate modes of burial practice is best explained by the establishment of Buddhism on the plateau, with its transformation, rejection, and modification of pre-Buddhist forms of mortuary ritual practice. Although surrounding cultures may have provided models for the form and construction of these mounds, their appearance on the plateau is best seen as an indigenous response to social and political processes. The appearance of animal remains in tombs, especially the horse, sheep, and goat (or caprids in general) remains poorly understood. It seems highly probable, however, that these ideas are not indigenous responses or creations, but rather borrowings from regions to the west or northwest. Their absence in Neolithic-era burials on the plateau strongly supports this observation. Whether the appearance of these remains in the tombs of the dead reflects cultural practices which are continuous with practices that later became association with Bon cannot be ascertained at this time. The defleshing of the dead at Samdzong may be explained by either the appropriation of ideas from the west, specifically those associated with Zoroastrianism, or from more southerly sources, possibly from India, as Buddhism became more widely accepted on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas.

Many of these ideas and hypotheses could be tested if the archaeological record of mortuary remains on the plateau itself were more robust. These tests will have to wait, however, until more systematic archaeological research by Chinese, Tibetan, and foreign scholars becomes more commonplace. Until then, we will have to content ourselves with working around the margins and seeking potential sources of new ideas as well as indigenous developments within a more robust chronological framework.

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