Burial in the Landscape
Remarks on the topographical setting of the grave mounds in early Central Tibet

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The background of my talk\textsuperscript{1} is an Austrian Academy of Sciences based research on the Tibetan tumulus tradition, a project with an increasing data collection related to more than 400 grave fields in the area of Central Tibet.\textsuperscript{2} In terms of chronology, these sites relate to the two crucial periods in the political development of the plateau lands – the time of minor principalities (or what one may call the chieftdom period) and the succeeding period of the empire (7th-9th cent. CE). The beginning of this form of burial practice is rather uncertain, however, and our proposed date of 4th century is only provisional (TKG: chap. 1).

First a few basic data:

• Within the Highlands tumulus landscapes of a similar density to those in Central Tibet are to be found only in the former A zha or Tuyuhun territory of eastern Tibet – likewise with mixed fields of smaller (round or oval) mounds and larger elite tombs. Here as there, the latter are mostly trapezoidal and most likely not to be dated before the 7th century.

• In Central Tibet the density varies enormously. Note the gaps between the central areas and the western and eastern parts (Fig. 1). The geographic section given on Fig. 2 – the area due east of Lhasa (including parts of 'Pha yul) – has more than 100 cemeteries, whereas further west, in the core area of the Right Horn, for example, there are only a two dozen or so. As already noted elsewhere (TKG: chap. 2.3), these variations in density can actually only be explained by assuming that other forms of burial were practised in parallel with the mound burial - burial in cist tombs, or forms of exposing the corpse, for example; and possibly also among elite families or members of the classical tumulus category – largely the civil and military aristocracy and, more generally, the battle-tested heroes.

• Apart from this imbalance, the tumulus fields are largely situated in the old districts of Central Tibet’s core regions that were dominated by individual (lineage-organised) families long before the Empire. There is undoubtedly a link between territory, lineage and burial mound practice, but these “peripheral” grave fields (i.e. fields situated outside the royal necropolis of Phying ba) rather served as communal cemeteries of a settlement area and were not solely the burial sites of one family or lineage. Such “mixed” burial-mound sites can be described as “district fields” (Fig. 3), which were under regional representatives of the state authority and served as burial places for the local population and the officials domiciled in these areas (The elite tombs in such district fields can be identified by their size and other structural criteria, and often we find the arrangement of groups of tombs that possibly indicate several generations of closer relatives from one lineage, in other words

\textsuperscript{1} This is the written version of a paper held by the author at the 14th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, 19th to 25th June 2016, Bergen, Norway. There are only a few adaptions compared to the origial presentation; the source references are limited to the minimum and mainly relate to chapters of the author’s forthcoming “Territory, kinship and the grave: On the identification of the elite graves in the burial mound landscape of imperial Central Tibet” (short TKG), in: Hazod, G. and Shen Weirong (eds.), Tibetan Genealogies. Studies in Memory of Tsering Gyalpo (1961-2015), Beijing., pp. 1-79, and to the TTT website (see fn. 2).

\textsuperscript{2} Austrian Science Fund (ASF) project P 25066-G19, based at the Austrian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA). For the list of tumulus fields (current state: 0001-0415) and principal (partly annotat-ed) illustrations, maps etc. of the individual sites, see www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition (hereafter TTT).
members of a *bu tsha rgyud*, the term usually used in older documents to describe a larger lineage organisation; see for details, TKG: chap. 5).

- There is a development in the typologically mixed district fields: we find structures characterised by stones on the surface, which probably indicate older Neolithic cist graves as also found elsewhere in the Highlands; then smaller oval mounds, and finally the various forms of elite structures, including the types of pagoda or stupa tombs of the later (Buddhist) period (Fig. 4). This relates to the continuity of older burial grounds, a characteristic element in settlement-pattern archaeology.

It is also noteworthy in this context that some fields are situated next to sky burial sites, which in some cases may date back to an older pre-Buddhist history. Fig. 5 represents the example of Chu mdâ in Skyid shod (TTT: field no. 0135), where the sky burial is situated next to the village shrine dedicated to the local *yul lha*. We find a special case in the famous mound of Myi yul Skyi mthing in Kong po (Fig. 6), commonly ascribed to Gri gum (~ Dri gum) btsan po, which is used as sky burial site or more precisely water burial (with the parts of the corpse thrown into the river). Yet it should be noted that such a situation with several chronologies of burial practices combined in one site actually contradicts the genealogy of burial practices related in the account of the mythical kings, where the oldest forms are described as having been situated in the uppermost zones of the mountain areas before the first tumuli were erected in *yul* or the more immediate settlement area (see TKG: Appendix I). So some serious uncertainties in reading the chronology of such peripheral burial sites remain. On the other hand, the classification of the burial mounds’ topographical setting itself is fairly clear.

In fact the vast majority of cemeteries are located in the non-arable alluvial zones, usually not far from the villages, or at the edge of the areas under cultivation. (We can assume a high continuity of place names: the names given in Fig. 7, the map of Lower Yar lung, refer to places that are largely already attested for the 7th century. In other words, the situation we find in terms of settlement pattern (the spatial relation of living area, arable and non-arable zones) with certain restrictions can be applied to the time of the tumulus history.) Then, less frequent are cemeteries (or groups of tombs) on a mountain or mountain ridge above the valley, or even in the middle of the cultivated land (TKG: chap. 2.2). This topographical setting conveys the overall image of a seemingly contiguous world of the living and the dead. In the local tradition the tombs are accordingly often named as the ruins of former houses, or one speaks of “collapsed towns”, as if they are just abandoned residences of the settled area – a classification that may also serve to legitimise the monuments’ destruction by the locals, which continues to this day. At the same time, certain mounds are often marked with a cairn or have a local deity shrine on top and remained untouched. The question is to what extent this situation of tumulus sites that we find today is indicative for an assessment of the original ritual position of the grave fields. In connection with the famous grave of emperor Srong btsan sgam po (Fig. 8), for example, the sources (namely *Rgyal po bka' thang*, see TKG: fn. 11) speak of an enclosure that is described precisely in the sense of a separation between the living and the dead. In our on-site surveys we repeatedly came upon the remains of perimeter walls of single mounds or also groups of tombs. In Khrom chen, one of the most extensive elite fields (Fig. 9), recent surveys by Lhasa-based archaeologists have revealed that the whole cemetery may have been enclosed by stone walls. Presumably, these simply served to protect the sites from grave robbers, and the grave custodians (*dur srung*) mentioned in the sources in connection with the tomb of Songtse n Gampo probably primarily served this mundane purpose of protection from uninvited guests; this was coupled with

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a ritual position when it says that they were not allowed to leave the grave area all their lives. (They apparently subsisted on the gardens established in this grave territory; perhaps the grain fields in the Mu ra necropolis go back to this institution). These barriers were not absolute but reportedly opened each year, where on the day of the emperor’s death, the society came together again for celebrations (TKG: chap. 2.1). In this sense I would not speak of a taboo boundary between the living and the dead, but of a protecting demarcation of a sanctuary that – similar to monuments of the later Buddhist context – was part of the conventional landscape classification. (The account in the chronicles which speaks of the worship of certain princely tombs in the form of regular circumambulations (cf. Hazod 2007, above fn. 3) may be Buddhist coloured and relate to a later period; on the other hand, there are no reasons not to assume similar forms of access as part of the original tradition, both related to the royal and the peripheral burial mound sites.) In any case, what we can state is that the tombs are usually in close proximity to the settlements, at a distance as in the example of G.yu gsar, a village in lower Yar lung (Fig. 10) that is already mentioned in the founding history of the 7th-century temple of Khra 'brug (cf. also Fig. 7).

The characteristic of the trapezoidal graves, which by the way are fairly uniform in their angular dimension – between 80° and 85°, has repeatedly been mentioned. This form is not a Tibetan invention; they are attested in ground plans of elite tombs related to the Xiungnu (2nd cent. BCE), for example, although these tombs mostly have no mounds but were built as stone-marked flat graves. And the trapezoidal shape can even be found in the stone edging of much earlier Central Tibetan cist tombs (See Feiglstorfer, forthcoming, in G. Hazod and Shen Weirong (eds); above fn. 1). In case of the trapezoid mounds, often up to a hundred in one compound, one gets the impression that they were simply an adaptation to the existing topography: composed as hills and situated at the edge of the hillside or within the trapezoid shaped alluvial fan, the tombs actually merge with the environs and even larger structures are often almost indiscernible from some distance (cf. Fig. 11).

The longer side of the trapezoid indicates the direction of the mounds – facing the valley (Fig. 12). The fact that in one and the same cemetery almost every grave has its own orientation seems to be simply the result of topographical adjustment. This also means the graves evidently have no common reference point in the landscape (a particular mountain or monument) to which they were aligned. This is all the more evident where cemeteries are located on both sides of the valley and as it were facing each other (cf. the map of Fig. 7). The only orientation we can recognise in the graves’ outer appearance is to the landscape or the inclusion in the natural architecture of the landscape. I call it the concept of external orientation; this should be distinguished from the inner orientation as defined by the position of the grave chamber, the coffin or the body.

The drawings of Fig. 13 provide two examples of reconstructions of the interior of trapezoidal mounds that clearly show a deviation of the orientation of the grave chambers from the outer trapezoid. What we see here are obviously two concepts of orientation applied in the constructions of one and the same tomb. In a forthcoming paper (in G. Hazod and Shen Weirong (eds.), see fn. 1) Hubert Feiglstorfer has compared data on inner orientations of tombs (position of the body, coffin, grave chamber) in Tibet and early Mongolia (Xiungnu and Xianbei context). One finds a slight but nevertheless noticeable predominance of the north (NE, NW), in contrast to China, where in princely tombs of the Han and Tang periods the exact cardinal orientation prevails. One may speculate as to how far these northern orientations relate to certain stars or constellations, namely the Great Bear, or the seven brightest stars of this constellation, which are visible the whole year circling around Polaris. In Mongolia these seven stars are addressed as “seven gods “ (or divine brothers, also known as “seven Buddhas”). For Tibet, Bettina Zeisler recently suggested seeing the seven stars of the Great Bear as being associated with the genealogy of the seven heavenly kings,
the Gnam gyi khri bdun (with khri in the proposed original meaning of star); and Zeisler logically reads the 8th King (Gri gum btsan po), with whom the Tibetan tumulus history reportedly started, as “the star that died.”

I do not feel competent to comment on the possible linguistic problems in this new reading of the origin account of the Tibetan kings (especially related to PT 1038); and actually the archaeological data on the tombs’ inner history are still seriously lacking to substantially support the theory of “Polaris (or circumpolar seven star) orientation.” On the other hand, I see no reason to doubt the information in the (later) classic chronicles, which says that in the period after the seven kings funeral priests emerged who observed the stars in connection with the construction of tombs (TKG: chap. 6). And also in the Dunhuang texts (such as PT 1042) the “dance of the stars” (skar gar) is mentioned in connection with the interment, namely the placing of the thugs gur into the thugs khang, whatever this exactly refers to (cf. TKG: fn. 57). (Analysing the terms specific of grave construction in old Tibetan documents in relation to what we find in situ represents a major challenge; for example, what exactly should be understood structurally by the terms bang so, se mo gru bzhi, ring se or thugs khang, which in PT 1042 apparently refer to different elements of the grave complex? see TKG for references.)

Evidently related to the story of the appearance of the “dur bon who observed the stars” is the Tibetan astrological tradition, which claims that the Tibetan observatory known as Stag phu Nyi thig dates back to 3000 years before present. This site is located in the Stag phu valley of Skyid shod (probably the Skyi Stag tsal of the Old Tibetan Annals), next to the (Dge lugs) monastery of Stag phu dgon situated opposite the local burial mounds of Stag phu (Fig. 14; TTT: 0110).

In this form, the recently renovated observatory (Fig. 15) is a product from the late 17th century, when under Sde srid Sangs rgyas Rgya mtsho, along with the medical traditions, the astrological system was also unified. Through the upper window of the tower the beam of sunlight that falls on the gnomon (shadow pointer) determines the equinoxes of the astronomical beginning of the spring and autumn season (sowing and harvest) and provides further astrological information related to the 27 lunar mansions and the 12 signs of the zodiac engraved in the two circles around the gnomon. The whole appears to be a formal adoption of the Chinese Gaocheng (Fig. 16), which was built under Kublai Khan as the central observatory of altogether 27 astrological sites established throughout the core regions of the Yuan empire. The Gaocheng was namely the extension of an earlier observatory used in the Tang period, which in turn is said to be the re-occupation of a site already recorded in the 11th century BCE (Zhou Dynasty).

The gnomon as basic instrument for mapping the sky has a long history (already mentioned in Babylonian times), and similar to Gaocheng, for Stag phu we can also assume an earlier use of the site, at least from the imperial period. Detailed archaeo-astronomical declinations of the Stag

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6 Information given by the director of the Lhasa Sman rtsis khang; personal communication, Lhasa 2015.
8 Cf. e.g. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaocheng-Observatorium.
phu sky and landscape through the viewing angle of the window of the tower are planned in the frame-work of our project. It is interesting that precisely in this valley the outward orientations of the graves are in a northerly direction (N and NE; cf. Fig. 14.)

There are good reasons to include the sky in the study of pre-Buddhist burial practice; the heavens apparently were the place of the Great Beyond (or the paradisial “land of joy”; dga’ yul) and possibly also formed part of the concept or the idea of the tomb, an issue where certain developments or adaptations in the period of the Tibetan tumulus history can be assumed, which we do not exactly know, however.

One of the few Central Tibetan peripheral graves that have been archaeologically surveyed in more detail relates to Mound 8 of the field of Ser khung (Fig. 17; TTT: 0047). The often quoted graphic representation from this excavation illustrates a largely intact inside of a medium-sized elite grave, with nine steps leading down to the entrance of the central grave chamber; the entrance is on the level of the natural surface; from here another seven steps lead to the main chamber; behind this there was a smaller auxiliary chamber. One may see here a symbolic representation, with the nine steps symbolising the vertical dimension of the universe as is often described, and the seven steps perhaps indicate sky stages that lead to the final destination of the deceased. This would imply an image of the universe where the sky is not above but below, here recalling the notion of a reversal of the vertical order, or the (shamanistic) aspect of mirroring the sky in the landscape as is known from various cultic aspects in later traditional Tibet. (Charles Ramble has recently explicitly highlighted this issue)\(^{10}\)

In PT 1286 (l. 35-36), Tibet (or the place where the mythical ancestor arrived) is described as both the core of the earth and the centre of the sky; maybe that’s less a poetic rendering than the standard image of an ancient Tibetan convention, where under certain ritual conditions heaven and earth were not thought of as distant poles but as congruent spheres. This would explain, for example, why (according to one tradition) the heavenly ancestor is drawn as an aquatic being or as “fish gri” as indicated by the name of Nya gri btsan po in the Kong po inscription. In PT 0126 it is alluded to that at the same time the heavenly land of Dmu was part of a geography on earth which the messengers of Phyva passed through to bring their matter before the lord of Dmu (see TKG, fn. 60 for references).

The descriptions of the travelling to the "land of joy" in the texts are rather terse: with the deceased on its back the psychopomp animal crossed a river, perhaps in addition a pass, that’s all. This topic leaves much room for speculation of the paradise’s location. There was apparently the idea of a vertical journey to heaven as expressed in the rope (dmu thag) connecting the sky and the earth, or similar symbols (such as the coloured (mdos like) vertical eight-threaded net (rgyal (*rgya thag rgyas) mentioned in connection with the (elite) se mo gru bzhi mound burial (Bialek 2015, op. cit., s.v. index); this is what the literary perceptions tell us. What I see is that the actual arena for this trip was evidently the landscape, which in its symbolic classification included the sky. In this sense, the journey to the Great Beyond perhaps rather meant the toppling into an “inner (heavenly) orientation” without actually leaving the arena of the conventional landscape (Fig. 18).

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Fig. 1. The distribution of burial mound sites in Central Tibet (0001-0415).
(The red symbols indicate the GPS values of the individual grave fields as given on the TTT website: www.oceav.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition; drawing: J. Schörlinger.)
Fig. 2. The tumulus fields in the areas east of Lhasa (Upper Skyid shod, incl. Lower ‘Phan po).
(G. Hazod, based on satellite photo, Corona 1970)
Fig. 3. The "district field": the example of 0324. (Drawing: G. Hazod)

Fig. 4a. Fig. 4b. Fig. 4c. Fig. 4d.

Fig. 4. Principal grave types: The cist tombs (5a, related to TTT: 0246), the round shaped tomb (5b; TTT: 0330), the "coffer shaped" trapezoidal elite tumulus (5c; TTT: 0076), and the stupa tomb (5d; TTT: 0397). (Photographs by G. Hazod 2015 (a), 2007 (b), 2005 (c), 2015 (d))
Fig. 5. The village, the yul lha, the sky burial site, and the tombs: the example of Chu mda’ in Skyid shod (0135).

(Photograph and graph by G. Hazod (2013), based on satellite photograph, Digital Globe)

Fig. 6.
Kong po Mi yul Skyid mthing (~ Skyid thon, Skyi(d) sdings): The dur khrod and the bang so.
(Fig. 6a: Drawing by G. Hazod, based on satellite photo, Digital Globe. For the (Bon po) mural of 6b, see Hazod 2007, above fn. 3.)

Fig. 6a.

Fig. 6b.
(The inscription says that the sky burial site of Mi yul Skyid thon is the burial mound of Gri gum btsan po – mi yul skyid thon dur khrod ces | gri gum btsan po’i bang so yin |)
Fig. 7. Lower Yar lung (white square = grave field; drawing: G. Hazod, based on satellite photo, Digital Globe.)

Fig. 8. The tomb of emperor Srong btsan Sgam po. (Photograph: G. Hazod 2013)
Fig. 9. The fields of Khrom chen (TTT: 0339, 0340), Lha rtse County. (Based on satellite photo, Digital Globe)

Fig. 10. The issue of distance: The grave field 0003 behind G.yu gsar Village in Lower Yar lung (cf. Fig. 7). (Photograph: G. Hazod 2013)
Fig. 11. The single grave of 0325 (ca. 70m, frontside), situated next to 0324 (see Fig. 3). In the valley of the Mdog gzhung gtsang po of imperial G.yas ru. (Based on satellite photograph, Digital Globe 2012)
Fig. 12. The outer orientations of the trapezoidal mounds: The example of 0112 (Thongkyi in Mal gro).
(Based on satellite photo, Digital Globe 2010)

Fig. 13a. Opened mound of 0131; survey and drawing: H. Feiglstorfer 2015, 2016

Fig. 13b. M-2 of Reshui, after Tong Tao 2008: 317 (ref. in TKG)

Fig. 13. Reconstruction of the inner complex of an opened mound in central Tibet (Lo valley, Fig. 13a, TTT: 0131) and of an archaeologically surveyed mound in eastern Tibet (Reshui, Fig. 13b).
Fig. 14. In Stag phu of Skyid shod: The observatory of Stag phu Nyi thig opposite the burial site of 0110. (Based on satellite photo, Digital Globe)

Fig. 15. The Stag phu Nyi thig observatory situated next to Stag phu dgon in the Stag phu valley of Upper Skid shod, Mal gro County. (The (fractured) gnomon (nyi thig) is in the centre of two circles, which indicate the 12 signs of the zodiac and the 27 lunar mansions; photo. H. Feiglstorfer 2015.)
Fig. 16. The Gaocheng observatory of Dengfeng, Henan Province, China. (Photo at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/)

Fig. 17. Mound M-8 of Ser khung (0047; Grva nang County, Lokha Province).
Fig. 18. Travelling to the paradise.

Fig. 18a. Field 0112, section (see also above Fig. 12). (Photograph: Hazod 2010)

Fig. 18b. Section from the Guolimu Panel II. (For reference and context, see TKG: chap. 6, and TKG: Fig. 20.)