INTERIM REPORT
The Burial Mounds of Central Tibet: A historical-anthropological study and documentation of the tumulus tradition of early Central Tibet (4th–10th century CE)

Website: www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition

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1. Report on research work
1.1 Information on the development of the research project
The project had the favourable starting situation of a considerable foreknowledge of the existence of peripheral tumulus fields in Central Tibet (i.e. situated outside the royal necropolis of Phyingba), based on previous surveys by the project leader in the area of historical ethnography of early Central Tibet, in the course of which some notable discoveries had already been made and also published. A systematic survey of the enormous dimension of the tumulus landscape was lacking however, and consequently the documentary work moved to the centre of the working programme, based on fieldwork and the evaluations of the new ethnographic, landscape-archaeological and architectural data and the information from textual sources. This was related to the task area of a historical identification of the specific dissemination of the burial grounds in the old territories of (predominantly agrarian) Central Tibet. Here the study followed the assumption that the burial mound history correlates with the development of chiefdoms in Central Tibet, whose territories today are largely localisable and whose beginning can only vaguely be dated to ca. 4th century CE. We also took this date as the hypothetical start of the tumulus tradition, which coincides with the situation in Qinghai, where, a second tumulus area of similar density is to be found in the Tuyuhun area, on the upper reaches of the Yellow River. The end of the tumulus history in the early 10th century was commonly known (Hazod 2013). Finally, the working programme included the task of principally classifying the burial sites in terms of the specific location, the shape and size of the mounds and their specific position within the cemeteries etc. – observations that were linked to studies of the grave fields’ social implications. Another focus concerned the question of historical genealogies of the Central Tibetan burial mounds, where we first paid attention to the parallels of the contemporary situations in Qinghai. The biggest challenge was (and still is) the relationship between textual sources (esp. funeral texts in Old Tibetan documents) and the realities of the Central Tibetan tumulus landscape, a task area where we have not fully met our expectations, mainly because of some changes in the research orientation.

In the course of the project there was a significant shift in the working programme towards an increasing focus on fundamental research and the documentary part, due to the highly productive in situ surveys, but even more because of the quantitative extension of the number of grave fields (from the original ca. 150 to the present state of more than 420 fields). The identification of new burial grounds was provided by satellite imagery, which today is accessible in high-resolution throughout most parts
of the study areas. The photographs served as archaeological prospections and in combination with the on-site information and textual sources allowed us to gradually map the burial mound landscape in terms of historical identification, spatial analysis and the settlement-pattern situation etc. The proposed establishment of an interactive and searchable database (www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition) all the more moved to the centre of the documentation work. In fact, today the work on photographic, cartographic and architectural representations that has been done so far is largely available on the project website. In this sense the database developed into a preliminary form of publication of the research results, which has then selectively to be included in the studies of print publications (e.g. Hazod 2016-a, 2016-b, Hazod in press-a, -b; Feiglstorfer 2015, Feiglstorfer in press-a).

This shift in the research priorities at the same time was, to some extent, at the cost of other task areas; beside textual analysis of Old Tibetan material this mainly concerns the still insufficient evaluation of the new basic material and its contextual analyses. This also means that the proposed central book publication, though well advanced, is still far from completion. On the other hand it was precisely the unexpected wealth of new data that led to the clarification of questions (partly with corrections to original assumptions) and to completely new study areas. This relates first of all to the question of the graves’ orientation and its possible astronomical relations, a topic with a wide radius of cultural implications that accordingly moved to the centre in the final part of the project and is also proposed as a focus of the follow-up project attached to the present status report.

The fieldwork campaigns (2013, 2014, 2015) were productive indeed, but were under the special government internal development in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of recent years, which has increasingly complicated the on-site studies for Western scientists. The involvement of archaeology in the field research thus had to be limited to surface inspections using the tools of the non-invasive prospection archaeology in only reduced form – with nevertheless ample results (mainly based on the range imaging technique of the Structure from Motion (SfM) photography). In addition, access to remote districts has been even more limited in recent years. A number of burial sites we had planned to visit were located in areas to which we could not get official permits, which again led to changes in the original fieldwork plans.

A notable innovation in the project’s personnel area was obtaining the services of the Tibetan archaeologist Shawo Khacham for the project, an expert in Tibetan tumulus archaeology who is currently teaching at the Tibet University in Lhasa. The cooperation with him during the fieldwork 2015 was highly productive and closer teamwork is proposed for the second part of the project. Similarly important for the development of the project was the participation of Joanna Bialek, a linguist-lexicographer of Old Tibetan (Munich University), who joined the team in the last project year. This important collaboration is planned to continue in an extended form.

1.2 Most important results
1.2.1 Contributions to the advancement of the field

The actual extent of the Central Tibetan tumulus landscape was until recently largely unknown to the Western research. Thus the identification of the sites and their documentation in the form as it exists today here opened a new terrain in the studies of early Tibet that can be considered as the most important result of the project work. Particularly noteworthy are the first prospective-archaeological and architectural surveys of selected sites. From this followed a number of new insights into the construction history of the tombs (Feiglstorfer 2015, Feiglstorfer, in press-a) or also insights regarding the
identification of elite tombs in the peripheral fields (Hazod, in press-a, Hazod 2016). In a broader sense, the empirical data also led us beyond the closer tumulus history to a significant enrichment in understanding the culture of imperial Tibet and the Highlands’ pre-Buddhist societies and their place in the larger context of the Central Eurasian cultural world.

A good overview of the project results is provided by the tumulus website with its division into “maps”, “thematic introduction” and “sites”. The “sites” page is interactive, where after clicking the site numbers (present state: nos. 0001-0421) one is guided to the respective location on the satellite photos (provided by Google Earth) as well as to further information represented by annotated photographic and graphic illustrations. The starting point is the “site list”, which is divided into the categories of “site number”, “district”, “name of the site”, “geographical position” (GPS values plus altitude), “field type”, “mound type” and “survey” (i.e. details on which the information of the site in question actually is based, i.e. through visits or only by sat photographs). Introductorily to the site listing there is a brief explanation of the principal classifications, related to “field type” (FT-A, FT-B, FT-C; differentiated by the cemeteries’ positions in the settlement area) and “mound type” (MT-A, MT-B, MT-C and D-MT (differentiated by size and shape (round, quadrangular, trapezoid, stupa-shaped) and building material). In the “thematic introductions” there are again selectively specific issues presented in the form of annotated graphic and photographic illustrations. In this way some basics of the research results will be demonstrated to visitors, while it is clear that this work on the website is constantly being updated. The development of the tumulus page was not least reflected in the increasing number of burial sites. As said, the intensive searching of satellite imagery at the beginning of the project brought the identification of numerous new fields, a fact that necessarily influenced the in situ surveys. It was clear here from the outset that the approach could only be selective in this context, with particular emphasis on those fields that have elite tombs (i.e. walled, chambered and mostly trapezoidal MT-C graves and MT-D type of graves) or fields that feature a special mixture of several grave types. The abovementioned difficulties in getting access to remote sites also necessitated the focus on fields in accessible districts, namely especially to the Lhasa Valley and various parts of the Lhoka province. Altogether today we have detailed photographic documentation of about 80 sites, of which 20 have been studied systematically on the basis of prospective archaeological and architectural surveys. The remaining part is largely documented too, on the basis of sat photographs, in some cases complemented with historical-geographical information.

One of the task areas in the working programme was the integration of the “Place Name Index of TAR” (Xixang Dimingshi, Beijing 1993) into the website in digitalised and searchable form. We see the open access of this toponymic catalogue (with a total of more than 44,000 entries) as an extremely useful contribution to the historical field of Tibetan studies, which is also confirmed by its many users since its release in 2016.

The results in the documentary part were made possible by the innovative interdisciplinary approach in the field research and data analysis, namely the combination of historical ethnography and text, and the use of architectural and archaeological prospection methods (represented by the use of Structure from Motion and the translation of satellite information into GIS programmes – a first-time venture in fieldwork-based historical Tibetan studies). In concrete terms, this was the cooperation with experts from the prospective-archaeology (from the renowned Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Archaeological Prospection and Virtual Archaeology, Vienna (LBI ArchPro), archaeologists and historians from various institutes in Lhasa (Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (TASS), Cultural Relics Bureau and Tibet
University) and experts in the field of textual studies (University of Leipzig, University of Munich). The surveys and analyses in historical ethnography and architecture and the transmission of the data into the website were under the responsibility of the closer project team (Hazod, Feiglstorfer, Schörflinger).

During the fieldwork there were some surprising discoveries, this includes:

- Burial grounds that were only vaguely detected on satellite photographs, and on site turned out to be cemeteries with enormous graves of the elite mound category (0105, 0137, 0171, 0402).
- The find of an opened burial mound whose outer walls were filled with stupa-shaped *tsa tsa*, an attachment which evidently was part of the original construction (and not a later addition).
- The discovery of several cist tombs (a pre-tumulus type of burial) within the compound of burial mound fields.
- The finding of stone lions from the imperial time (related to grave field no. 0105; Hazod 2015). Two more grave lions have recently been found by our colleagues from Tibetan archaeology in Lhasa. We received the most recent information in this respect while writing this report. (The information includes photographs as well as details on the local context of this finding.)
- We owe important discoveries to the Tibetan colleagues (Shawo Khacham of the Tibet University and Shakya Wangdu of the Cultural Relics Bureau), who also provided information on unknown sites, including important fields with the particularity of stupa-shaped tombs from the later imperial period (0397, 0398).
- The Cultural Relics Bureau (CRB) has also allowed us to photograph (still undocumented) finds from its archive, among them the unique artefact of an imperial seal (from the grave field of Slebs, related to the aristocratic family of Mchims; grave field no. 0092; 0093). The small artefact (2x1.8 cm) made of bone and targeted with an eyelet bears the inscription “Kha’u zhang gzig” over the engraved image of a horse – an indication of a certain rank (*yig tshang*) holder of the imperial aristocracy. In addition, the project received important information on chronology, such as the chronology that gives the 5th century CE as the earliest dating of an elite mound in Central Tibet. However, such information based on still unpublished data from archaeological surveys needs to be further examined.

These new findings are for the most part already documented in publications (below 3.2), whereas other finds from our surveys are only given in elementary form and currently constitute the starting point for research to come. This includes perhaps the most innovative aspect of the research results – the issue of “orientation” which in its broader application not only relates to possible astronomical implications but also to the concept of heaven (and its interrelation with ritual landscape) shared by the emperor and aristocratic families. Regarding the astronomical aspect in tumulus burial, indications for this (apart from textual sources) were found in certain architectural particularities of grave construction (Feiglstorfer, in press-a), and – as noted in the attached follow-up proposal – to continue this study inter alia needs to include the (still unexplored) history of the Central Tibetan observatory of Stag phu Nyi thig, which was visited for the first time by the project team (12/2015; cf. Hazod 2016-a for a first presentation of this site).

A contribution that significantly advanced the study area is provided by a new inquiry into the necropolis of the Tibetan royal family, based on our most recent visits (2013, 2014) and the relevant textual sources, most notably the *Gsang ba yang chung*, which has been presented in translation. This lengthy (80-page) chapter is combined with a number of issues related to the identification of “elite grave” (Hazod, in press-a; and continued in Hazod in press-b).
1.2.2 Original hypotheses and what has emerged forth

i. Spatial distribution of burial grounds, “lineage” and “home territory”

As to the study on the spatial distribution of the burial grounds our assumption seems to be largely confirmed, according to which this distribution principally reflects the history of the old settlement and territorial situation in the agricultural areas of Central Tibet, i.e. the situation of the ancient chiefdoms headed by families whose dominions the sources later described as “minor principalities” (rgyal phran) in relation to the imperial power. In the time of the empire the regional ruling families served the central government, which granted them a certain degree of their ancestral territorial rights, including here the right – according to our assumption – to erect the graves in their homelands. However, a closer look at this situation of elite burial sites has led to some adjustments to our initial theory, or opened the fields to more detailed studies, which in part are included as a separate topic in the follow-up proposal.

These re-considerations concerned, for example, our assumption of a direct connection between lineage and mound burial. The density of the burial site distribution in the districts of Central Tibet clearly indicates that apart from the mound burial other forms of burial (such as forms of exposing the corpse), were apparently also widely practised also within the aristocracy. To some extent, this also questions our definition of the social category of tumulus candidates. The concept of lineage by which the political leadership was associated may also lead to certain misunderstandings. The image of “clan based societies” often to be found in studies of early Tibet is here to be questioned. Transferred to the situation of peripheral cemeteries with their characteristic mixture of smaller, round and larger trapezoidal mounds, today we think that this is less to be read as the burials of members of lineages or clan society, but simply of inhabitants of the respective settlement area, with the out-standing tombs in terms of size and form here reflecting the presence of the regional political leadership. When focusing on these, dynastic organised and territorially multi-branched ruling families new questions arose in the course of the project – questions related to “home territory” and the relationship of regional autonomy and the central government with regard to the establishment of regional burial sites. A first approach to these issues is included in Hazod, in press-a.

ii. The Settlement pattern situation and the graves’ ritual environment

Previous studies in the field of historical ethnography refer to the special characteristic of a historically relatively high continuity of settlement in the regions of Central Tibet, something that positively influenced the identification of ancient toponyms and in general the study of the settlement pattern situation in the Central Tibetan territories (cf. Hazod 2009). Our classification of the positions of the burial grounds, with field type FT-A being most common (= the position in the uncultivated alluvial zones, yet usually not far from the settlements), confirms our thesis that the graves were not outside the classified landscape, but part of the inhabited world. In this context the surface archaeology (and also textual sources) provides the indications of territorial delineations – in the form of remains of walls, which might be interpreted as a separate enclosure of “ritual space” within the settlement area. In addition, similarly to the Qinghai burial mound context, numerous traces of sacrificial pits and trenches, and also the remains of buildings were be detected. We find certain features of the architectural additions only in connection with the largest burial mounds; apart from stone monuments this refers to step constructions in front of the trapezoidal structure, which we first called “procession stairs” but in actually turned out to be sacrificial trenches laid out in a step-like arrangement.

Noteworthy is our experience of a partly still living oral tradition, which often provided important complementary information on the burial sites, not least in connection with the grave mounds that are
still used today, for example as the seat of the communities’ representative local deity or territorial god (yul lha) – a situation that recalls certain mention in textual sources. This form of continuity makes the tumulus archaeology of Central Tibet unique.

iii. The issue of the tombs’ orientation
To the best of our knowledge, within the old burial mound cultures of Central Eurasia the trapezoid shape can be found only in Central Tibet and Qinghai. Our initial assessment of the alignment towards the valley and river course in all was insufficient and did not take into account the components of the graves’ interior, for which we only recently obtained important insights through the architectural reconstructions of certain (historically opened) structures (see Feiglstorfer, in-press – also considering comparative data from the Qinghai and Central Asian funeral contexts). These new insights clearly point to the counting of astronomical relations, as mentioned (chap. 1) one of the central issues in the follow-up proposal.

iv. Historical genealogies
A thesis we took up was the assessment based on the Euroasianist and Tibetologist C. Beckwith (2009), who saw early pre-Buddhist Tibet and its specific funeral tradition as part of the “Central Eurasian Cultural Complex”, something that we would largely confirm (cf. Hazod 2014). Basic institutions related to the political entourage system such as institutions of the administrative and military organisation, the “mobile centre” (with assembly and oath-taking), the “royal hunt” or the funeral and mourning system appear to have formed a joint complex, whose precise historical genealogies are not so clear, however. Our current focus is on the comparative situation of the Tuyuhun context and their proto-Mongolian (Xianbei) legacy, a study area that needs to be further advanced in the course of the follow-up project.

v. Theoretical Implications
With regard to theoretical implications, a new aspect came to the fore, which based on recent works in anthropology (Bloch 2013) suggests the need to re-evaluate “religion” in pre-Buddhist Tibet, namely to the effect that in this pre-World-religion context we can speak less of religion, but rather of the “religious” that is inseparable from the social. Bloch speaks of “transcendental social”, which with some restrictions indeed proves to be a coherent instrument in analysing the social and ritual world of the Tibetan burial mound tradition (Hazod, unpubl. paper 2015).

vi. Further aspects
A number of individual studies have been proposed for the project’s working programme, such as studies related to the question of who built the burial mounds, who was responsible for the construction and aftercare of the graves and what political and socio-economic relations can be derived from these issues, or the gender aspect, and some more studies that have been addressed in publication (Hazod, in press-a, in press-b, Hazod 2016-a) or conference presentations (below chap. 3). A new aspect concerned the discussion of the localisation and nature of the pre-Buddhist paradise, a study that is still in a preliminary state and is proposed to be included in the programme of the project’s second part.

1.3 Information on the execution of the project
• Duration of the project:
The project started at the beginning of 2013 and after expiry of the three-year period (12/2015) was extended in cost-neutral form until 6/2016, and again from 7/2016 until February 2017. The invitation of the project leader as fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Wiko) for the academic year 9/2014 to 7/2015 resulted in a partial interruption of the project – this related to the employees of the project, whereas the project leader used the Wiko time for project-

• **Personnel:** The core team of the project consisted of the project leader and the co-workers Dr. H. Feiglstorfer and J. Schörflinger BA (both part-time employed at ISA, the home institute of the project leader). Further minor funded collaborators were Martin Gamon (from LBI ArchPro ), Prof. Per K. Sørensen (University of Leipzig) and Joanna Bialek (work contract, from 10/2016) as well as partners in Lhasa (colleagues from the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences and David Holler MA), who made a substantial contribution to the project.

• **Expenses and deviations from the original budget plan:** The purchases of equipment (camera, computer software), of books and the costs for external services (English proof-reading, printing costs for posters, etc.) remained below the scheduled budget limits, and in fact a total of ca. €5000 has been redecated for other purposes. For the travel costs (fieldwork campaigns plus trips to conferences abroad) a total of ca. €40,000 was scheduled, of which about two-thirds was used, the rest was redecated. These remaining funds plus the amount saved from the interruption of the project were used for i) additional personal costs (J. Bialek – payment on work contract basis) and personnel costs related to the project leader – the most notable change compared to the original budget plan. (It concerned the compensation of the project leader’s salary, who was employed only part-time at ISA in the time of the project). ii) Expenses for external professional work for publications (layout work and processing of data (photographical, graphic and cartography-specific material) in the last phase of the project period).

2. **Personnel development – Importance of the project for the research careers of those involved**

We see the invitation of G. Hazod, the project leader, as fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Wiko) in the period of the project (9/2014-7/2015) as a notable recognition of his scientific achievements, and it was also related to the present project. At the Wiko he directed the internal Tibet focus “Tibetan Genealogies”, with the fellows Prof. Shen Weirong (Beijing) and Prof. Tsering Gyalpo, Lhasa, as partner. The latter is known as a long-time cooperation partner of the Austrian Tibetan Studies community, and of the project leader in particular. Tsering Gyalpo died in June 2015. The volume in memoriam of Prof. Gyalpo (ed. by G. Hazod and Shen Weirong) that will appear in 2017 (below chap. 3.2) includes major contributions by the project team as well as contributions by Tibetan colleagues with whom the project was closely associated.

Hubert Feiglstorfer (architecture) and Jürgen Schörflinger (scientific website programming) are internationally recognised as experts in their field, and their positions in the project will certainly provide new inputs to further promote their careers. Dr. Feiglstorfer is also an expert in soil studies (related to vernacular architecture in the Tibetan Highlands and the Himalayas) and will submit his second doctoral thesis in this field in early 2017, with numerous references to the construction history of the Tibetan burial mounds.

A positive impact of the project can also be assumed for the Tibetan colleagues, particularly Shawo Khacham, with whom future cooperation is proposed not only the tumulus project but also other parts of the Tibetan Study programmes in Vienna.
3. Dissemination of research results

3.1 Project-related participation in national and international conferences
(Invited, each with the presentation of a paper)


3.2 Project-related publications ([R] = reviewed, [PR] = peer reviewed; [OA] = open access)

G. Hazod. 2013. The Plundering of the Tibetan Royal Tombs: An Analysis of the Event in the Context of the Uprisings in Central Tibet of the 9th/10th Century, in: Cüppers, Christopher and Robert Mayer (eds.), Between Empire and Phyidar: The Fragmentation and Reconstruction of Society and Religion in Post-imperial Tibet. Lumbini: LIRI. [R] [OA]: This contribution is accessible as pdf at the project website; a Permanent Identifier through w3id.org (https://w3id.org/) is currently being planned for this online publication section.

  b) https://fedora.e-book.fwf.ac.at/fedora/get/o:836/bdef:Content/get


G. Hazod. 2015a. The lions of 'Chad kha: A note on new findings of stone monuments in Central Tibet from the Tibetan imperial period, in: Hazod, Guntram and Olaf Czaja (eds.), The Illuminating Mirror: Festschrift for Per K. Sørensen on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag (Dec. 2015). [R] [OA] (This contribution is accessible as pdf at the project website, in addition a later Open Access of this volume is planned by the Reichert Verlag.)


Project Team. 2013-2016: www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition: 
As noted above the documentations on the tumulus website we see as sort of preliminary publication of key results of the project work.

In preparation: 
G. Hazod. The graves of the chief ministers of the Tibetan Empire: Mapping chapter two of the Old Tibetan Chronicle in the light of the evidence of the Tibetan tumulus tradition (planned to be published in Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines). [OA] [PR] 
G. Hazod (with contributions by H. Feiglstorfer, G. Zotti and J. Bialek). Paradises in the Landscape: Mapping the Burial Mound Tradition of early Central Tibet. (Planned as publication in Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna), planned to be [PR].