

The archaeological exploration on the early settlements of nomadic cultures in Tibet

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Abstract

Along with the archaeological investigations and discoveries of the early nomadic cultures in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Gansu and Tibet, new tendencies are emerging in the theories and methods of the researches on the early settlements of nomadic cultures in China, and new enlightenments for the practices of settlement archaeology. This paper tries to analyze the basic features, cultural natures, external characteristics and other factors of the settlement remains of the early nomadic cultures in Tibet with the new theories and observation methods, and examine them in the macroscopic interregional perspective, in order to induce the approaches and paradigms for the systematic researches on the ancient nomadic cultures in Tibet.

Keywords: Pastoral culture–history–China; settlement archaeology; Tibetan Archaeology

The central issue

In the texts of Han historians, pastoralists were described in a fixed manner as “move about in search of water and pasture and have no walled cities or fixed dwellings (逐水草而居, 毋城郭常处)”. During the 1930's, the Russian scholar, George Roerich, already suggested that attention should be paid to the remains of the ancient pastoralists of Tibet. He believed that because of geographic and environmental factors, that Tibet preserved the artistic traditions of ancient Central Asian nomads. Up until recently, the focus of research has been on Tibetan religious art. Recently, however, folk art that dates to prior to the introduction of Buddhism to the plateau has been discovered. However because of the slow pace of archaeological work in the region, little is known about this. There has been a lack of sufficient attention paid to the remains of pastoralists in the field of archaeology. Pastoralists have been presented as not having fixed residences and as leaving few or ephemeral settlement sites behind. As a result, an agenda focused on the settlement archaeology of pastoralists has not been a central focus. However, recently a series of new archaeological discoveries on the Tibetan Plateau has prompted a rethinking of this issue.

The types of archaeological remains that typify early pastoralist settlements

To date, early evidence for pastoral remains on the Tibetan plateau comes from the first cordillera of mountains in the north and west of the plateau, otherwise known as the Qangtang zone. This area is a traditional zone for pastoralists and its environment is in a zone of arid or semi-arid steppe, with low temperatures and low precipitation and high variability in diurnal and monthly ranges of temperature. As these conditions are not favorable to the growth of cereal crops, the ancient inhabitants of the region adapted to it through choosing a pastoral lifestyle. The inhabitants of the region today have still preserved this tradition. However, in the valleys of southern and of eastern Tibet, both agriculture and pastoralism are practiced by the inhabitants, and the ancient settlement sites from these areas share greater similarities with agricultural settlement: an example of this would be the Neolithic site of Karub in Qamdo, eastern Tibet. How can one classify early pastoralist sites? According to the current archaeological evidence, these sites can be classified into at least three main types according to the scale and the nature of settlement type.

1. The first type of settlement is a seasonal semi-sedentary settlement. This type of settlement appears to have a close relationship with the winter and summer settlements of current pastoralists. Under normal circumstances, when temperatures are warmer during the summer and plant life is more abundant, nomads would simply bring tents and food to these camps and live a nomadic life without having a fixed residence. In the winter they would return to the winter camp in order to avoid the cold winter snow and to protect their livestock. As a result the winter camps of pastoralists are different from the permanent settlements of farmers as these are only seasonal semi-sedentary camps. Typical settlements of this type come from the site of Dindun in Zanda County in the Sutlej River drainage of Western Tibet. A superficial glance at the settlement itself would lead one to believe that these are not different from those of typical farmers, however if we consider these settlements in conjunction with other archaeological phenomena in the region, their form indeed possibly belongs to an early pastoralist culture.

First of all, the settlement site in this area contains three different types of remains: residential area, burials and rock art. Houses built out of stone, burials and rock art all exist in the same place. This kind of phenomena, where all these elements are placed together is characteristic

of the settlements of early pastoralists. In addition, the position of this settlement is very similar to that of the winter camp of modern pastoralists. The construction of the stone houses at Dindun is exactly the same as those of modern pastoralists at the site. Local Tibetans told us that in the natural environment of far western Tibet, these semi-subterranean houses were good for protecting from the harsh winter, retaining warmth and has the advantage of being easy to relocate. They are well adapted to being a seasonal residence for pastoralists.

2. The second category of settlement types are temporary camps. Pastoralists inhabit these camps only briefly during the course of the year. The largest particularity of these camps is the fact that they do not leave permanent traces of buildings on the ground. However they do leave other traces of pastoral life such as hearths, ash layers, stone implements, pottery and animal bones. An example of this type of settlement is that of the site of ICags-ri-Thang (“Thang” in Tibetan means flatland) at Qelungdo Village in Yangbajain Town, Damxung County at northern Tibet.

From the analysis, this type of site is very likely an open-air camp-site that was used by ancient pastoralists on a regular basis. No architectural foundations were found at the site, however a number of remains related to daily life at the site. “Stands” made by stacking stones and ash accumulations ranging over 4cm deep were found at the site. These are all the legacy of an outdoor camping site. Sherds of pottery wares, large amounts of microliths, and burned animal bones and bone residues have also been found at the site. This further demonstrates that this type of site was closely related to a pastoralist lifestyle.

3. The third type of settlement are large walled settlements. These settlements have large dimensions and the organization within the settlement is also rather complex, with a central area of the settlement having the largest and most visible structures. Structures of smaller to medium size that are densely packed surround the central part of the settlement. The remains of graves are also present. These settlements are reminiscent of an organization based around a society composed of a pastoral chief and different hierarchical strata. Five large pastoralist settlement sites have already been found in eastern Xinjiang, northern Gansu, and western Inner Mongolia. For example at the site of Dongheigou in Barköl County, Xinjiang, a high terrace made out of stone has been unearthed which is composed of stone blocks piled up layer by layer. Around the high terrace, stone enclosures in square plan, burials with ring-shaped stone cairn and round stone cairns were found. Based on ancient textual and inscription evidences, Prof. Wang (2009) believes that these large settlements are associated with the ruling centers of the early pastoralist groups of the Yuezhi, Wusun, and Xiongnu of the Eastern Tianshan mountains. He believes that these are related to the “*wangting*” or “kingly courts” described in the literature.

In the sites of western Tibet that have been truly

subject to archaeological surveys, we can say that these large scale sites do exist. An example of this would be the site of Khyunglung Ngulkhār (“the Silver Castle of Garuda Valley”) in Gar County that was discovered in the course of an archaeological survey in the area. The total surface area of the site is over 13ha. The different types of settlement can be described functionally: there appear to be defensive structures (including defensive walls, fortresses etc.), residential buildings, public buildings, religious structures and other ancillary structures used for daily living. Surrounding this central sites there were also numerous cemeteries around the foot of the mountain as well as additional residential remains. The average altitude of Khyunglung Ngulkhār was over 4500m above sea level and the surrounding environment is not favorable for agriculture, however, the inhabitants could have been engaged in high altitude pastoralism. We can thus preliminarily deduce that this site was an early ancient pastoralist site. Within the cemetery, there appear to be tombs that have much larger stone cairns and may be associated with individuals of higher social status. This may indicate that this is a large settlement of the “*wangting*” type. It shares a number of cultural characteristics with the large pastoralist settlements of Xinjiang, Gansu and Inner Mongolia. It is worth noting that in the Qangtang Plateau of northern Tibet and Ngari Prefecture of western Tibet, recently a number of foreign scholars discovered sites containing stone architectural foundations. For instance, in 1992, John Vincent Bellezza, an American archaeologist, has announced to have recorded more than 400 so-called “pre-Buddhist” sites. According to his description and classification, these sites have large high terraces and also have stone enclosures, stone cairns and stone architectural foundations. The author believes that these remains are very likely related to those of early pastoralist societies. It is worth carrying out future survey and excavations at these sites to confirm them.

The development of pastoral sites in the historic period

According to what has been described above, we can first ascertain that pastoralists did have had settlements or sites that had a number of different scales and levels of organization. The situation of early pastoralist settlements is extremely complicated. Early pastoralist cultures had sedentary and seasonal or half-sedentary patterns (in either winter or summer camps), but they also had temporary camp sites. In these they used stone, adobe and other materials to build long-lasting permanent settlements or ephemeral support for tents. With regards to social hierarchy, most of the settlements of the common people are densely arranged together, within which there are characteristic orderly stone enclosures on the ground (which come in both circular and square plans) and there are also residential cave sites dug into cliffs. As the ruling center of a “*wangting* (kingly court)” or “*yazhang*

牙帐 (headquarter tent)” is a large settlement which is more complex in terms of layout and structure; they are usually constructed on high stone terraces or on steep terrains such as at the top or middle of a mountain. These settlements have a strong military taste to them with layer upon layer of ramparts and some even have subterranean passages. In high-ranking large settlements, in addition to living quarters, there are also ritual areas that are likely associated with where pastoralist peoples made offering to the sky or sacred mountains. The fact that large stone sites which contain stone cairn burials of different scales and ranks, monoliths, “menhirs”, stone enclosures, boxed stone enclosures are distributed near the site show that worship of the gods and of ancestors likely took place together.

Progress must be made towards the understanding of different types of settlement sites of ancient pastoralists. At the above described site of Dindun discovered at Ngari Prefecture in western Tibet in addition to buildings that one can ascertain are residential in nature, there are a number of stone enclosures and circles present on the ground surface that have both square and circular plans. Although there are many indications that these foundations were used for pastoralist tents, there is still no concrete evidence for what their upper structure may have been. One possible way to study this would be through looking at archaeological iconography, historic records and ethnography to find clues to recover their original usage.

For instance, we can compare the descriptions of the mausoleums with tumuli of the *tsempo* (emperor) of the Tubo Empire and the tents in which they lived that are described in the following historical texts: *rGya bod yig tshang chen mo* (Archive of China and Tibet, by Tagtshang Dzongpa Peljor Sangpo), *Yarlung chos 'byung* (The religious history, by Shakya Rinchende), *Mkas pa'i dga' ston* (A feast for scholars, by Pawo Tsuglag Threngwa) and *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long* (The mirror illuminating the royal genealogies, by Sönam Gyaltzen). For example, the *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long* described the tomb of King lHa Tho-tho-ri snyan-shal as the following:

“His tomb was installed in his own country, The name of his country was Dar-thang of ‘Phying-lung;

This tomb too is a heap of soil resembling a tent (Sönam Gyaltzen 1994).”

From this we know that in the Tubo Empire period, there were both circular and square tents and these varied according to time period. In early Tubo times, circular mound was popular and rectangular burial mounds only began to appear in later periods. The earliest square burial mound belonged to Songtsen Gampo’s father, the king Namri Songtsen. During the archaeological survey of the middle reach of Yarlung Zampo River, the particular tombs with circular mound at Ngamring were excavated. It is possible that these were somehow related to the older tradition of tent-shaped circular tomb mounds described in the ancient Tibetan texts. These circular tomb

mounds that look like a round yak hair tent, are possibly reflections of the earliest type of settlement employed by Tibetan pastoralists.

In the burials of the Tubo period in Tibet, there is also a type of cave burial with dome-shaped ceiling. This type of burial is also an imitation of the dwellings inhabited by people.

This type of tomb generally is composed of a vertical shaft passage to the grave and the chamber. Piled up stone slabs form the walls of the tomb chamber and the tomb has a dome-shaped ceiling. There is generally a hole left at the top of the dome that has then been covered with an additional slate. This kind of tomb reminds one of the tent images depicted on the painted coffin from the Tubo period unearthed in Golmud Township, Delhi City, Qinghai Province. In the already published tent figures from Tubo period, the center part of the top of the tent always protrudes and a flared circular hole opens in it. These are currently the only archaeological evidences of tents; these tent images on these coffins are rather particular as all had circular fluted openings not too large. One can thus presume that the early pastoralists of Tibet had a kind of circular tent with a dome and a small circular opening at the top center.

In addition, on the ancient petroglyphs found in Tibet, occasionally one finds representations of tents. For example, in the petroglyphs at Jialin Mountain, four scenes depict rounded tents. Their form is somewhat different from that on the coffin paintings at the Tubo sites in Golmud Town, Qinghai, and it is likely that they represent a form of tent used by the pastoralists of northern Tibet. The petroglyphs at the Tashi Dor Peninsula locale at Nam Co Lake also depict scenes of daily life: the tents that are represented here also have fluted openings at the top of the tent and windows appear on the walls. These are similar to those found on the Tubo coffin paintings in Qinghai.

Modern ethnographic data show that today the nomads of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau rather use a type of tent shaped like a “tent-house”. These tents are made of the hairs of black yaks. This kind of tent is supported by several wooden posts. Ropes made of yak hair are used to anchor the tent at its four corners. The plan of this type of tent is square. Some scholars believe that this kind of square tent is similar to that of “black tent” of Central Asia. The tents used by the pastoralists of ancient Persia are similar to this kind of black tent. Given that the economic system of the Tibetan Plateau is similar to that of Persia, it is possible that the Tubo later received this kind of square black tent through exchange (Manderscheid 2001). In the Snarthan edition of the “*Kangyur*” that describes the pronouncement of Padmasambhava, there is the following description: “as far as ‘On-du in the Grugu kingdom the army forces of Tibet set up the black tents and escorted the people, divorced from their land, into the Mon territory (Thomas 1931).” If the “black tents” from Central Asia were transmitted into Tibet during the expansion of the Tubo Empire’s influence into Central

Asia, or if Central Asia pastoralists influenced Tibet is a question worth further research. Interestingly, in the early pastoralist sites of Xinjiang and Tibet, both square and circular stone enclosures exist. If these are indeed the remains of tent foundations, this indicates that at the time there may have been tents in both circular and square plans. This research on tent structure among the early pastoralists of the Tibetan Plateau has undoubtedly contributed to this question.

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Postscript

The original paper published in *Kaogu* 考古 (Archaeology) 2013. 4: 57–67 was authored by Wei Huo 霍巍 . This abridged version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Jade D'Alpoim Guedes 玳玉 .