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The Historiography of Tibetan Archaeology: From Prehistoric Artifacts to Scientific Excavations

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Abstract: The archaeological study of the Tibetan Plateau has developed through several important stages, shaped by the changing political, social, and cultural conditions of the region. This paper examines the main periods of archaeological research on the prehistory of the Tibetan Plateau. The history of this field can be divided into three clear phases: the Western Exploration phase (1925–1950s), the Geological Survey phase (1951–1978), and the Progressive Period (1978–present). The paper describes the key discoveries and important archaeological findings made during each phase. By looking at what was achieved and what difficulties were faced in each period, this paper offers a balanced understanding of how Tibetan archaeology has developed and where it fits within the wider study of Asian prehistory.

Keywords: Tibetan Plateau, Archaeology, Historiography, Pleistocene, Holocene.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tibetan Plateau has an average elevation of 4,000 meters above sea level and covers an area of 2.5 million square kilometers, making it the highest and largest plateau in the world (Zhang *et al.*, 2016a; Hien, 2018a). It has long attracted the interest of explorers, colonial travellers, spiritual seekers, missionaries, and researchers. Despite its difficult climate and isolated location, the plateau contains rich cultural and historical materials, with a prehistoric record spanning thousands of years. The archaeological study of this high-altitude region has followed a complex path.

The Western Exploration phase was shaped by the early efforts of Western geologists, explorers, and colonialist such as J. G. Anderson, Peter Aufschnaiter,

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Nicholas Roerich, and Giuseppe Tucci, who made important contributions by identifying significant archaeological sites and artifacts across the plateau. However, their work was often restricted by political conditions and the colonial setting of the period. The Geological Survey phase occurred alongside major political changes in Tibet and was marked by a contradictory combination of new findings and widespread destruction of heritage.

The historiography of Tibetan archaeology presented in this paper draws on existing published literature about the archaeology of the Tibetan Plateau. Early Western explorations from the 1920s to the 1950s relied mainly on travel accounts, personal memoirs, and field reports written by explorers, colonial travellers, missionaries, and geologists such as Cunningham, Francke, Anderson, Roerich, and Tucci. Although these sources are useful for early documentation of sites and artifacts, they were often limited by political barriers and lacked organized excavation methods. During the Geological Survey period from the 1950s to 1978, Chinese scholars shifted focus toward geological studies, and most archaeological discoveries happened by chance during construction and infrastructure development. From 1978 onward, archaeological work and discoveries increased significantly, carried out by Chinese, Tibetan, and foreign scholars.

2. THE WESTERN EXPLORATION PHASE (1920S–1951)

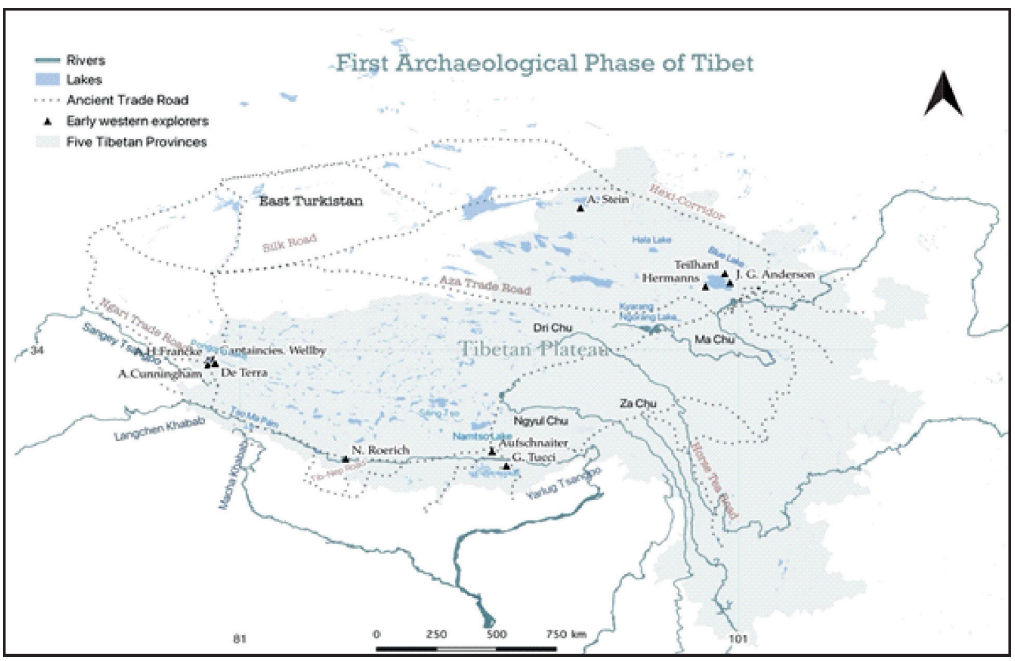
Tibet was largely closed to outsiders due to geo-political reasons, it became a place of great curiosity and attracted Western explorers and colonial travellers (Engelhardt, 2007; Roerich, 1931a). In the early period, most Western travellers and Christian missionaries visited Tibet between the 13th and 20th centuries. They introduced Tibetan culture to the Western world, which led to the publication of many travel accounts and personal memoirs describing the land and its people (McGovern, 1924).

In the 19th century, archaeologist Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), widely regarded as the father of Indian archaeology, travelled to the border regions of Tibet and Ladakh and recorded information about several areas in the Ngari region (མངའ་རིས), including Ru-thok, Sgar-Thok, and Pangong Tso (Cunningham, 1970). Based on the materials reviewed in this paper, Cunningham's work appears to be the earliest instance of an archaeologist visiting and documenting parts of Tibet (Map 1). About fifty years later, A. H. Francke (1870–1930), a well-known

Tibetan studies scholar, travelled to Ladakh to study eastern cultures. He carried out small-scale excavations at Leh and discovered prehistoric artifacts of Dardic origin, including ceramic objects found alongside human bones (Table 1, Map 1). He also surveyed border regions between India and Tibet, such as Pangong Tso and Ru-thok (Francke, 1914). In 1892, stone tools were found near Pangong Tso by Captain Wellby, and similar finds were possibly made later by de Terra, though the details remain unclear (Aufschnaiter, 1956a). In later years, several archaeological sites were found in those areas and in the broader Ngari region (Zhang, 2020). The first archaeologist to carry out excavations at the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau was likely J. G. Anderson. He was formally invited to China as an adviser to the National Geological Survey of China, and his role in Chinese archaeology is often compared to that of Cunningham in Indian archaeology. He is best known for discovering the Yangshao culture, which he initially connected to Near Eastern origins (Anderson, 1925a; Liu, 2012a; Yen, 2012), though this interpretation was later revised by Xia Nai (Hein *et al.*, 2021). In the 1920s, Anderson conducted excavations in Tibetan areas around Kokonor (Tibetan: མཚོ་སྨོན་པ།) in Qinghai Province and documented prehistoric artifacts including pottery, stone tools, and bone implements. His team surveyed areas around Kokonor, including Kayue, and conducted excavations along the Yellow River basin in the Trika region (Map 1, Table 1).

He discussed the typological similarities between these finds and other regional cultures and concluded that the area had been inhabited over a long prehistoric period (Anderson, 1925b; Black, 1925). Additional excavations around Koko Nor and parts of Amdo were also mentioned, though the details were not clearly described (Aufschnaiter, 1956b). During the same period, several Western scholars including Berthold Laufer (1874–1934), Sven Hedin, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), and Roy Chapman Andrews (1884–1960) were conducting research across Asia. Laufer documented his findings of Tibetan bones, skulls, and other artifacts (Laufer, 1923). Roy C. Andrews led the Central Asiatic Expedition and achieved notable results (Song, 2017). Sven Hedin led several expeditions between 1900 and 1934, reporting geological observations from the Changthang, Tsaidam, and Gansu regions (Ambolt and Norin, 1967). Teilhard de Chardin and Emile Licent (1876–1952) discovered fossils in the Ordos and Gansu regions, though it is not certain whether their work extended into Tibetan areas. Nicholas Roerich

(1874–1947), a Russian artist and archaeologist, led an expedition to Central Asia from 1925 to 1928, passing through Mongolia and reaching several Tibetan areas including Tsaidam, Nagchu, Changthang, Rzada Dzong, Tingri Dzong, Saga Dzong, and Gampa Dzong (Table 1). Roerich had originally hoped to find a large collection of xylographs and manuscripts (Roerich, 1931b). During this journey, his team discovered prehistoric artifacts, menhirs, cromlechs, stone alignments, copper arrows, graves, and megalithic monuments. Some of the graves were identified as possibly dating to the Neolithic period. J. Bellezza later studied these materials in considerable depth (Bellezza, 2002; 2003). The discovery of an "animal style" artistic tradition among nomadic groups in northern Tibet and the presence of megalithic monuments were considered significant findings. Roerich noted similarities between this animal style and those found across the steppes of southern Russia, the borders of China, and Siberian forests. He also suggested that the nomadic groups of northern Tibet, Kham, and Amdo were mostly long-headed (dolichocephalic), while farmers in the Brahmaputra Valley and south-eastern Tibet were mostly broad-headed (brachycephalic) (Roerich, 1931c).



Map 1: Western archaeologists on the Tibetan Plateau with the Year before 1951 Map © : L. Kyab

Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984) visited Tibet multiple times for research purposes. He discovered a skeleton, stone tools, copper arrows, and several prehistoric caves, which he estimated to be approximately 2,000 years old. Although most of his work focused on Tibetan religion and culture, his book *Trans-Himalaya* contains the most substantial archaeological content, despite limited prehistoric detail. Tucci not only described his own surveys but also reviewed and discussed the discoveries made by earlier explorers in Tibet. His major works on Tibetan studies include *Secrets of Tibet* (1935), *The Tombs of Tibetan Kings* (1950), and *The Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (1949).

More recently, Chinese archaeologists have uncovered important prehistoric artifacts at sites that Tucci had already identified, such as Dongkar Cave, Pyang Cave, and the Gurugam burial site (Tucci, 1973a; Lu, 2016). Some burial sites he mentioned have still not been fully explored. The Mustang region also contains thousands of caves that were used as prehistoric and historic dwellings, and while some have been studied, many across the Himalayan region remain un-investigated (Simons *et al*., 1994; Seeber, 1994; Tripathee, 1994). Some Western explorers focused more on Tibetan cultural studies than on archaeology in the strict sense. For example, Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) travelled to Central Asia four times between 1900 and 1930, and his discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts stands as one of the most significant achievements in the study of Asian history. Unlike Stein, both Roerich and Tucci were not permitted to conduct formal excavations in Tibet. Other scholars, including Richardson, Sir Charles Bell, and Petech, contributed important books on early Tibetan history and culture. Despite restrictions, many Western travellers still managed to enter Tibet. Some focused on prehistoric research through archaeology, palaeontology, and geology, in addition to the missionaries, diplomats, and general explorers who also visited the region.

Another significant figure in early Tibetan archaeology is Peter Aufschnaiter (1899–1973). Originally a British prisoner of war, he escaped to Tibet in 1946 alongside Heinrich Harrer, who later became well known as the author of *Seven Years in Tibet*. Aufschnaiter himself wrote *Eight Years in Tibet*, a work that is less widely known.

During his time in Lhasa, he managed the Tibetan government's hydroelectric power project (Tsarong, 2022). In 1950, he discovered prehistoric artifacts along the Kyichu riverside. He informed local colleagues to report any unusual finds and

paid workers to assist with excavation. The excavation uncovered clay pottery, skulls, skeletal remains, bones, stone tools, and flat stones (Aufschnaiter, 1956c; Harrer; Genna, 1956). Whether or not the excavation was conducted systematically, it represents the first excavation of a prehistoric archaeological site in central Tibet. Heinrich Harrer briefly mentioned this discovery in *Seven Years in Tibet* (Harrer, 1953). In 1951, Aufschnaiter took the artifacts with him when he left Tibet and later published a detailed report in the *East and West* journal. His discovery was also discussed by Professor Tucci, Giuseppe Genna, and Guglielmo Mangili (Genna, 1956; Mangili, 1956; Tucci, 1973). The discovery was first recorded in Tibetan in *A Political History of Tibet* and later in the English version *One Hundred Thousand Moons* (Shakabpa, 1976; 2010), based on what Aufschnaiter had personally told Shakabpa.

As mentioned above, various Western scholars came to Tibet at different times and with different objectives, yet together their discoveries and excavations across the Tibetan Plateau created a new understanding of Tibetan history and culture. This period is distinctive in the history of Tibetan archaeology because it was driven entirely by Western explorers and represents a separate and unique phase in the development of the field.

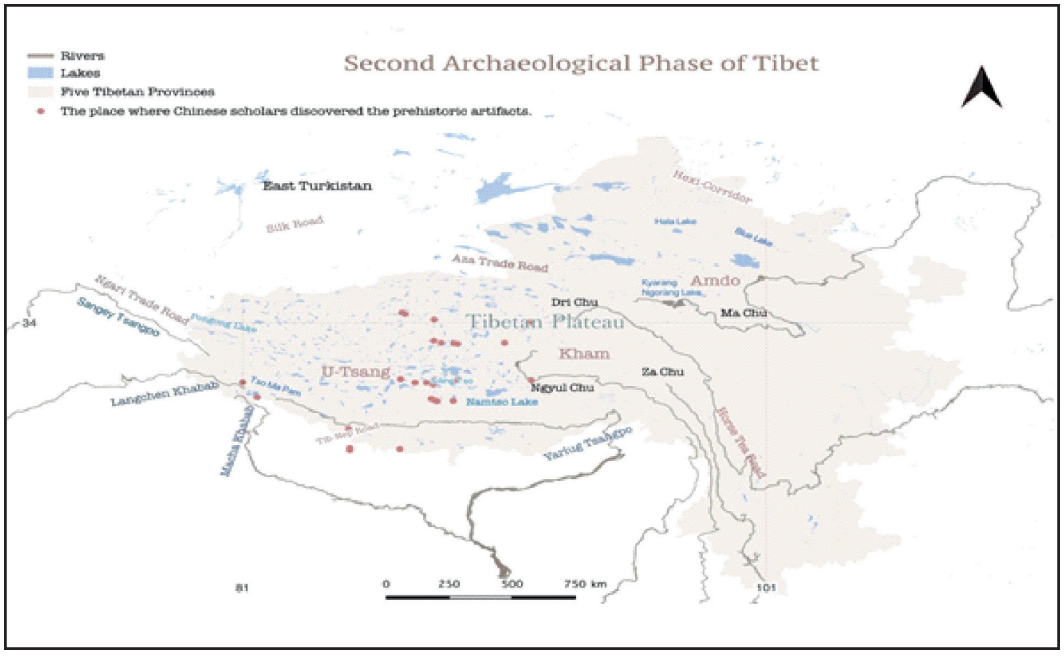
Table 1: Phase 1: The table shows the discovery of the Western explorers such as person, location, year, and artefact

Name	*Discovery/Excavation*	*Location*	*Date*
A. Cuningham			
A.H. Francke			1903
Capt Wellby	Stone tools	Panggong Tso	1892
De Terra	Similar finds	Panggong Tso	1932
Teilhard	Some excavations	Koko Nor	
Hermanns	Some excavations	Koko Nor	
J. G. Anderson	Pottery	Koko Nor, Kayue & Trika	1924
N.A. Stein	Dunhuang manuscript	Dunhuang cave	1909

Name	*Discovery/Excavation*	*Location*	*Date*
N. Roerich	Menhirs, cromlechs, alinements, copper arrows, graves, "animal style".	Tsadam, Nagchu, Ngari, etc.	1925-28
Tucci Aufschnaiter	Copper arrows, Prehistoric caves, etc. Pottery, stone stools, burials, and human bones	Nyari Lhasa	 1951

3. THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY PHASE (1951–1978)

During this period, no Western scholars were able to access Tibet for research or excavation for several decades. However, Chinese scholars began investigating Tibetan regions and discovered numerous prehistoric artifacts across the plateau (Table 2, Map 2). Many of these discoveries happened by chance during the construction of roads, buildings, and hydroelectric facilities in Tibet (Wangyunje,



Map 2: Red dots: The location where archaeological artefacts were discovered during the geological survey between 1951-1977 Map © L. Kyab

1983; Jamyang and Hou, 2004a). Until the end of the Cultural Revolution, no archaeological excavation was carried out with a clear research purpose on the Tibetan Plateau. From 1951 to 1976, Tibetan archaeology remained at an early and undeveloped stage, limited mostly to accidental discoveries of prehistoric artifacts. No organized excavation took place during this time, and large-scale construction work caused significant damage to many archaeological sites. The situation was made worse by the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and led to the destruction of a vast number of cultural heritage sites and archaeological monuments across Tibet and other regions.

Chinese scholars began surveying Tibetan regions in the 1950s, and prehistoric artifacts were found in various locations from time to time. Archaeological research in Tibetan regions has been carried out by institutions such as the Academy of Social Sciences, Sichuan University, Peking University, and the Institute of Cultural Relics Protection of TAR (Table 2). Before 1976, research in Tibetan areas was primarily focused on geological studies. In 1956, a research team led by geologist Zhang Zhungbu examined the Nagchu region and the upper course of the Drichu/Yangtze River. They found stone tools that were identified as belonging to both the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. Shortly after, additional stone tools were discovered in the upper part of the Tsang region in central Tibet (Jamyang and Hou, 2004b). In 1966, the Chinese Mount Everest Expedition found approximately thirty Paleolithic stone tools in two different locations known as Gya-li and Lug-ra. The Academy of Social Sciences also conducted surveys across various Tibetan regions and located stone tools at sites averaging around 4,400 meters above sea level (Fig. 3, Fig. 4). In the 1970s, the Social Science Department of Tibet organized a conference on archaeological research and identified three historically significant regions of the Tibet Autonomous Region as priorities for future excavation: Ngari (མངའ་རིས།), Chonggyai (འཕྱོང་རྒྱས།), and Nyingtri (ཉིང་ཁྲི།) (Liyiu, 1982).

Between the 1970s and 1978, a considerable number of prehistoric artifacts were uncovered as a result of large-scale construction work in the region. Unfortunately, many of these finds were damaged or destroyed before any proper archaeological assessment could be made (Hangje, 1983). Five sites in Nyingtri suffered severe damage, and workers reported that pottery fragments and human bones continued to appear throughout their construction work for nearly a month. The condition of the Nyingtri sites was documented as follows:

"All the human bones from the site were heavily damaged by heavy machinery. The bones were severely fragmented, making identification very difficult, with the exception of a few intact skulls. Large quantities of red ceramics mixed with sand and brown clay ceramics were found broken into pieces. A damaged stone chisel was also found among the pottery fragments. Unfortunately, the exact locations of the original graves could not be determined due to the extent of disturbance at the site." (Wangyunje, 1983; Kagang, 2003).

This account clearly illustrates the scale of archaeological destruction that took place in the Nyingtri region. A similar situation occurred at the Karuo site, where the eastern section was significantly damaged before any systematic excavation could be undertaken (Enzhen, 1982). In this period, cases of archaeological damage far outnumbered organized excavations or planned discoveries. Since China remained closed to the Western world for several decades, no formal archaeological excavation took place in Tibet during this time. Professor Tucci, who closely followed developments in Tibetan archaeology over the years, described the state of the field in his work:

"It must be made clear at the outset that Tibetan archaeology, if by archaeology we mean the results of properly conducted excavation, is still in a state of limbo. Even since Tibet was integrated into the Chinese People's Republic there has not been, so far as I am aware, any archaeological excavation in any part of Tibet; nor have I seen a single reference to any such research in any of the Chinese journals cited in the Bibliography, although Chinese scholars have now started publishing preliminary articles on the art treasures preserved in the oldest monasteries of Tibet." (Tucci, 1973b).

This statement clearly reflects the status of Tibetan archaeology both before and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), given that his book was published in 1973. In summary, most of the archaeological finds during this phase were not the result of planned research but rather accidental discoveries made during construction and infrastructure development (Table 2). This characteristic distinguishes this phase clearly from the other periods in the history of Tibetan archaeology.

Name	*Discovery/Excavation*	*Location*	*Date*	*Elevation*
Zhang Zhungbu	Stone tools	Nagchu	1956	
	Palaeolithic stones	At bank of upper part of Drichu	1958	

Name	*Discovery/Excavation*	*Location*	*Date*	*Elevation*
	Human skull	Nying-tri	1958	
Unknown	Some stone tools	Upper part of Tsang	n.d	
	14 stone tools	Dingri	1964	
M. Everest Expedition	30 Palaeolithic tools	Gya-li & Lug-ra	1966	
Academy of Social Science	350 stone tools	shan-rdzong, shan-rza, mtso-gnyis, *skyid-grong* *ru-thog*	1976-83	More than 4000 5200
Academy of Social Science	26 artifacts 40 artifacts	*ru-thog* nyi-ma ding-ri	 1976 1976	4600 4620 4500
Workers	Huge numbers of ceramics and human bones	Nying-tri site	1970s	
Unknown	A stone hand axe	Metok-dzong	1973	
	A stone axe and pottery	Loja valley, Pari-dzong.	1973	
Workers		Koko Nor		
Chinese Academy of Geological Sicences	Stone tools	Panggong Lake	1983	

Table 2 Phase 2: This shows the discovery of the geological survey such as location, year, and artefact during the geological survey

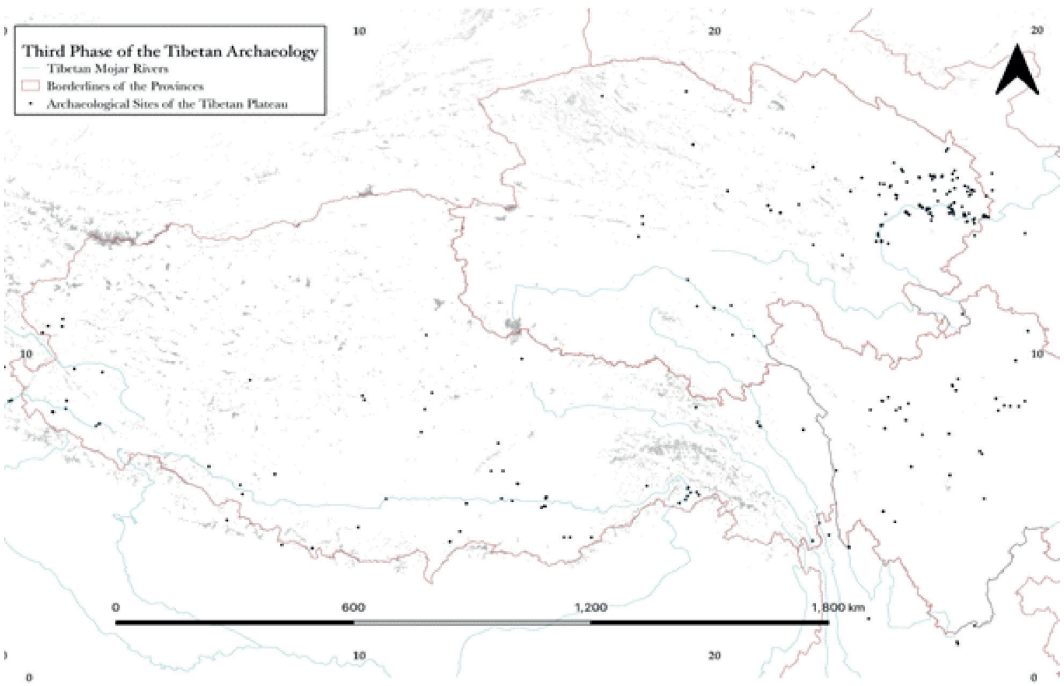
4. THE PROGRESSIVE PERIOD (1978–PRESENT)

Following the second phase, many archaeological sites were systematically excavated, leading to remarkable and previously unseen discoveries in the archaeological exploration of the Tibetan Plateau. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, China reopened its doors to the outside world. At the same time, Chinese scholars began moving away from a single-ethnic focus in their research and started adopting a multi-ethnic perspective (Liu, 2012b). As a result, Chinese archaeological projects

began paying greater attention to different ethnic groups across various provinces, and organized excavations were carried out in different parts of the Tibetan Plateau.

Archaeological investigations have yielded substantial evidence of Paleolithic occupation across the Tibetan Plateau, with remains documented at significant sites including Genji Da Kar/Baishiya Karst Cave, Melong Tagpug Cave, Nya-deu/Nywa Devu, Chusang, Shardad Tso/Xardai Co, Tsadam Che, Tsadam Chung, Piluo, Tingduphupa Cave, Tangda, and the Da and Xiao Qaidam/Tsadam localities (D'Alpoim Guedes and Aldenderfer, 2019c; Zhang, 2018a). The chronological range of these assemblages spans from the late Middle Pleistocene to the early Holocene, approximately 160,000 to 40,000 BP, attesting to the presence of hominin populations — including Denisovans and anatomically modern Homo sapiens — in one of the most environmentally extreme high-altitude landscapes on earth.

Subsequent to the Paleolithic horizon, a series of Epi-Paleolithic sites have been identified across the plateau, situated at considerable elevations ranging from approximately 3,202 to 4,830 meters above sea level. These include Tanakma/



Map 3: This shows prehistoric sites in the Tibetan regions of Five Provinces Red dots: Archaeological sites Black Dots: Major Rivers of the Tibetan Plateau Green Lines: Rivers Map © L. Kyab

Heimahe, Jiangxigou, Sure, Zhuluole, Duogeze, Geting, Zhabu, Xidantan, and Layihai (Zhang, 2020; Brantingham, 2013). The Epi-Paleolithic cultural horizon on the Tibetan Plateau is broadly dated to approximately 150,000–65,000 BP, representing a critical transitional phase in the region's prehistoric occupation sequence.

The Neolithic period is represented by a growing corpus of excavated sites distributed across the plateau's lower-lying zones. The systematic excavation of the Chamdo Karuo site (3,100 meters above sea level), situated along the Dachu/Mekong River and conducted between 1978 and 1979, marked a foundational moment in Tibetan prehistoric archaeology, constituting the first jointly undertaken Tibetan-Chinese archaeological excavation in the region. This investigation was directed by Tong Enzheng of the History Department of Sichuan University, alongside Sonam Wangdu of the Institute of Cultural Relics Protection of TAR and Leng Jian. Subsequent Neolithic investigations have extended to additional sites, including Xiaoenda, Nyingtri, Zongri, and Chugong. The available archaeological evidence indicates that Neolithic cultural traditions developed across the lower-elevation zones of Kham, Amdo, and U-tsang, with a broadly established chronology of approximately 5,700–4,000 BP (BCRTAR, 1985a; Wangdu, 1995; Aldenderfer and Yinong, 2004a; D'Alpoim Guedes and Aldenderfer, 2019).

The Metal Age is documented through a significant body of archaeological evidence distributed across multiple regions of the plateau. In western Tibet, key sites include the Dongkar-Piyang complex (excavated 2018–2020), the Chuvthag site, Kaerdon Fortress, the Gurugyam site (excavated 2012 and 2018–2023), the Jiesang cemetery, Doilungdeqen, Gebusailu cemetery, Sangda Longguo cemetery, Zongduo cemetery, and Mentu cemetery. In the north-eastern plateau, Bronze Age cultural traditions emerged from approximately 4,000 BP, with distinct regional cultures — including the Qijia, Kayue, Xindian, and Nomuhong traditions — distributed predominantly along the river valleys of Amdo. In the Kham region, the Metal Age is further attested by an extensive distribution of stone cist and square burial sites, reflecting regionally distinct mortuary practices consistent with broader Inner Asian Bronze Age cultural patterns.

Over the past few decades, a large number of archaeological sites have been excavated on the Tibetan Plateau through collaboration among the Institute of Tibetan Studies, the Institute of Cultural Relics Protection of TAR, Sichuan University, and

various international research projects, some of which are still ongoing. During this phase, Tibetan, Chinese, and Western scholars have all contributed to the study of many archaeological sites on the plateau. Their work has produced outstanding results that have earned recognition in international academic circles and have greatly advanced the understanding of prehistoric cultures on the plateau. Over the past forty years, numerous prehistoric cultures have been identified one after another in Tibet. Research has been steadily progressing toward reconstructing the prehistory of this high-altitude region, with a particular focus on the earliest human occupation and the early domestication of plants and animals (Brantingham, 2001; Aldenderfer, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2018b). This phase is defined by significant progress in the discovery and study of prehistoric cultures on the Tibetan Plateau, which has encouraged scholars to seek answers to long-standing questions in the field.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study endeavours to establish three periods of the historiography of Tibetan archaeology, wherein each phase is distinguished by its specific temporal parameters and characteristic features within its broader historical context. A critical examination of these phases reveals that archaeology on the Tibetan Plateau cannot be reduced to a purely scientific enterprise; rather, it constitutes a complex cultural practice that operates at the intersection of political imperatives, colonial legacies, geological conditions, and the fundamental human capacity to reconstruct collective pasts through the systematic analysis of material culture.

Material cultures found based on archaeological excavations of the Tibetan Plateau were interpreted in a specific way (Trigger 2008: 267). The archaeological exploration of the Tibetan Plateau's margins requires careful consideration of early excavations and their historical context. Despite the pioneering work in the Gonghe Basin in Amdo, J. G. Anderson's contributions remain notably underrepresented in Tibetan archaeological scholarship. Of particular significance is the limited academic attention given to his discoveries around Tso Nyonpo (known as Kokonor in Mongolian and Qinghai Hu in Chinese), the Kayue site, and various locations along the Yellow River near the Trika region. During 1923-24, Anderson conducted systematic classifications of several cultural sites—including Ch'i Chia, Ma Chang, Panshan, Hsin Tien, Sha Ching, Ssu Wa Shan, and Kayue—all situated along the northeastern margin of the Tibetan Plateau (Anderson 1925e) (Map 3).

The scholarly community has arguably overlooked the significance of these discoveries in relation to the plateau's prehistoric cultural development. It is worth noting that while site nomenclature predominantly employs Chinese terminology but most of these sites were discovered within Tibetan regions. The attribution of these prehistoric cultures solely to Chinese origin requires careful reconsideration, as such categorization may not fully reflect the intricate cultural mosaic that historically characterized this region's development.

Likewise, Aufschnaiter – the one who discovered the prehistoric site in Lhasa after just 30 years of J. Andersson's. But, the importance of his discovery was poorly evaluated in the papers. In central Tibet, he dug the site nearby Kyichu river and. Morphologically, those ceramics, however, look like the pottery from Spiti Valley from India, but it requires scientific research to confirm it. Like historical connections, material culture witnesses the prehistoric cultural network among the Himalayan mountainous regions (Sharma 1989, Lu 2021). If we consider those materials that Nicholas Roerich discovered on the way of his journey, especially; other scholars G. Tucci and John Bellezza observed their similarities. Prof. Tucci mentioned those copper arrows might have a connection to central Asia, and he highlights those prehistoric caves in western Tibet and Ladakh that might have preserved a long prehistoric culture (Tucci 1935b). Roerich thought that "animal style" is similar from Siberian forest to the Trans-Himalaya. Tucci and Roerich both felt of great regret that they could not excavate those archaeological sites because Tibetan authority strongly objected on that time (Roerich 1931c).

Somehow, the archaeological investigation of the Tibetan Plateau has evolved through three distinct phases, each shaped by unique historical and political circumstances. The initial phase 1920s-1951 was dominated by Western explorers and archaeologists whose work was intertwined with colonial expansion, establishing early methodological and interpretative frameworks. The second phase 1951-1978 saw the exclusion of Western researchers and coincided with the Cultural Revolution, resulting in significant cultural losses and primarily incidental discoveries during construction activities rather than systematic research. The third phase 1978-2021 marked a transformative period with unprecedented scientific excavations across the plateau. (Hein 2018; Aldenderfer and Yinon 2004c). This period fostered collaboration among Tibetan, Chinese, and international scholars,

though challenges persist regarding Tibetan scholarly participation and international access to research sites.

5. CONCLUSION

The archaeological exploration of the Tibetan Plateau has developed through three distinct phases, each shaped by the political, social, and cultural conditions of its time. During the Western Exploration phase (1920s–1951), pioneering efforts by Western explorers, geologists, colonialist and scholars such as Cunningham, Roerich, Tucci, and Aufschnaiter laid the early foundation for understanding the prehistoric past of the plateau. Although their work was often limited by political restrictions and lacked systematic excavation methods, their discoveries and observations provided valuable early documentation of archaeological sites and artifacts across the region. The Geological Survey phase (1951–1978) was marked by a significant shift, as Chinese scholars took over research activities while Western access to Tibet was completely closed. However, this period was largely characterized by accidental discoveries made during large-scale construction work, and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) caused widespread and irreversible destruction of many important cultural heritage sites and archaeological monuments. As a result, organized and purposeful archaeological research remained largely absent throughout this phase.

The Progressive Period (1978–present) represents the most productive and scientifically advanced stage in the history of Tibetan archaeology. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and China's reopening to the world, systematic excavations were carried out across the plateau by Tibetan, Chinese, and international scholars. Major discoveries, including Paleolithic sites, Neolithic settlements, and prehistoric burials, have significantly advanced the understanding of early human occupation and prehistoric cultural development on the Tibetan Plateau. These findings have placed Tibetan archaeology firmly within the broader context of Asian and global prehistory. Taken together, the three phases reflect not only the growth of archaeological knowledge about the plateau but also the changing relationship between politics, scholarship, and the preservation of cultural heritage in one of the most highest and hypoxic regions of the world.

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