

caves

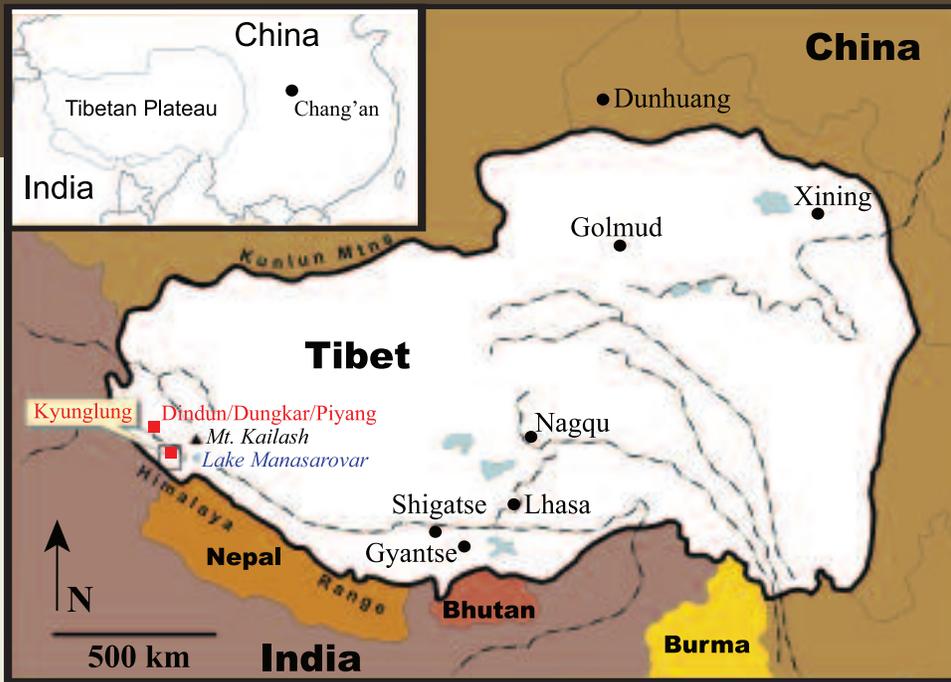
as Sacred Places on the Tibetan Plateau

BY MARK ALDENDERFER

ALTHOUGH MOST OF US think of Tibet as a high plateau riven by high mountain chains wide open to the skies, it has a deep, hidden, and underground dimension as well—numerous caves with extensive dark zones. Much of the plateau near Lhasa has a limestone geology, where natural processes create caverns and rock shelters. Many caves and rock shelters in Tibet have also been created by people. For the past two millennia at least, rock faces have been hollowed and used for domestic purposes and, more commonly, as shelters for monks, lamas, and other religious figures. Indeed, the large majority of caves on the plateau, both natural and artificial, are key elements in the sacred geography of Tibetan Buddhism.



At Piyang in western Tibet many caves have been dug into the face of the mesa.



within them. To better understand these caves I turned to indigenous Tibetan and Buddhist thought for insight into how caves are perceived.

Tibetans, like most people around the world, categorize the natural and built environment. Mountains, lakes, rivers, boulders, vistas, and caves have symbolic and sacred meanings. Ethnographers of the Himalayas have noted a duality of sacred categories—a fundamental distinction between up into the mountains and down into the lowlands below the peaks or beneath the surface of water. Mountains are the abode of gods and deities in

Despite the importance of caves to both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist belief systems, we know surprisingly little of the antiquity of cave use on the plateau. In great part, this is due to a relative lack of archaeological research. Until the 1970s, when Chinese archaeologists began systematic work on the plateau, there was no real sense of a Tibetan prehistory, and only recently has any research focused on the Buddhist era. Work in the major cave complexes has also been limited because most have active religious structures within them.

Understanding how caves are used is an important aspect of my research on the re-introduction of Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau after AD 1000 (*Expedition* 47(2):28-34). At Piyang—a key site in this process—over 1,100 caves of varying shapes and sizes have been discovered. Some are clearly habitation sites, while others are probably meditation caves, and still others have ritual architecture

both Tibetan Buddhist and pre-Buddhist belief systems, while spirits live beneath the water. In between, people live in a middle world of action and ritual. This tripartite division of the cosmos is common to many peoples around the world.

Tibetan sacred geography has deep roots in antiquity. One of its most important features is the concept of *gnas* (pronounced *né*). *Gnas* translates as “place,” but as Toni Huber and others have noted, it has a more active sense of “to abide” or “abode.” Landscape features are the abode of spirit forces and

Small, natural caves are found near Lhasa in south-central Tibet.



deities of all kinds. These entities may contribute their power to these landscape features, creating “power places” (*gnas-chen*) whose fields of power literally saturate the surrounding areas. Earth, stones, water, plant parts, and even the very air from such places are imbued with power.

Caves obtain *gnas* through association with famous religious figures, secular rulers, and spirit forces. One of Tibet’s most important cave systems is the Guru Rinpoche complex 30 km southeast of Lhasa in the Yarlung Tsangpo river drainage. These caves range from small, artificial shelters that served as hermitage or meditation sites to large, deep, subterranean passages that contain altars, statues, and wall paintings made over the past 800 years. Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, was an Indian tantric master invited to Tibet in the 8th century AD by the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen. Buddhist history relates that Guru Rinpoche was asked to subdue the demons of the plateau, thus preparing it for the establishment of Buddhism. In his pursuit of a demon, he created the labyrinthine caves of the complex by using his magical powers to tunnel through a sheer rock face until the demon was finally destroyed.

Caves may also obtain *gnas* by association with the birth or emanation of a powerful religious figure. In canonical Buddhist thought, Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, achieved enlightenment (nirvana) in a cave and, in a spiritual sense, was reborn through this process. Monks and lamas seeking nirvana have emulated this tradition for centuries, and their meditation caves, especially those of the most famous, are saturated with *gnas*. These caves are often revisited by later generations of yogis and monks who wish to absorb the *gnas* of these places to assist them toward their goals.

Although cave systems like the Guru Rinpoche complex have been modified by later generations who built shrines and



The cave temple of Palha Lumphuk in Lhasa provides access (through the upper door on the right) to the cave supposedly used by Songsten Gampo, the Tibetan Empire’s first Buddhist ruler.

altars within them, hermitage caves are distinguished by their utter simplicity. While they seldom contain recognizable features, many contain physical manifestations of their former illustrious users. Hand and footprints are said to have been pressed into the hard rock walls and floors, a clear manifestation of *gnas*. In some instances, these prints have been carved into the rock. In others, simple depressions are said to be the remains of the prints. Not everyone can see this evidence. It takes belief, training, and faith to recognize them. According to



Representations of the Buddha Sakyamuni, bodhisattvas, and historical figures—some more than 1,000 years old—are carved on the walls of Palha Lophuk, a cave excavated into the living rock.

the *Ti Se Gnas Bshad*—a late 19th century Tibetan guidebook on the pilgrimage route around a sacred lake near Mount Tise (known to Hindus as Kailash)—Kunchok Tenzin, an important lama, states, “Concerning the statement that here exist sands of gold, silver, lapis, and diamond, this is how it appears when seen by tenth-stage bodhisattvas who have perfected the

removes material from cave altars, pilgrims may take earth, water, stones, plant parts, and other objects from around the cave. *Gnas* saturates these objects, providing benefits to their possessors. For example, the earth taken may be formed into *tsa-tsa*, which can then be used at home on household altars, taken to other shrines, or placed in secret meditation places.

twin accumulations of merit and wisdom. But it does not appear this way to ordinary persons whose karmic obscurations have not been purified.”

Caves are pilgrimage destinations for both laypeople and religious figures. While there is no indigenous Tibetan pilgrimage tradition, there has been a remarkable syncretism between canonical Buddhism and the indigenous concept of *gnas*. All devout Buddhists are encouraged to make a pilgrimage at least once in their lives to improve their karma and advancement toward nirvana, while indigenous motivations involve *gnas* and the desire to benefit directly from a powerful place. The pilgrim may acknowledge Buddhist canonical motivations, but these tend to be obscured by the indigenous concept of *gnas* as the pilgrim gains physical and mental benefit from moving into the *gnas-chen*. For the advanced pilgrim, it is especially important to visit specific caves that have special meaning for that yogi’s religious lineage. For example, the Cave of the Subjugation of Mara at Lapchi in central southern Tibet has special interest for the Kagyupa order because its founding yogis, teachers, and lamas all meditated there for extended periods.

Cave pilgrimage has interesting archaeological implications since pilgrims leave things in caves. These include personal items (clothing, shoes, hats), household goods (bowls, glasses), and/or special ritual objects that have *gnas*, such as *tsa-tsa* (important Buddhist deities or bodhisattvas mold-shaped in unfired clay). Pilgrims may also take things from the shrine. Although no one

Caves may also serve as symbolic foundations for temples, shrines, and monasteries. The Potala Palace—Tibet’s most sacred site and the residence of the Dalai Lamas—was founded upon a meditation cave used by Tibet’s first Buddhist king, Songsten Gampo. Through this association with a powerful figure, the cave has become sacred, providing the basis for the establishment of a temple complex. The cave as *gnas* has spiritual power. Of course, not all caves, and not all temples, achieve this exalted status.

Returning to Piyang, our limited excavations revealed that most of the caves there were habitation or meditation sites. Some of the more isolated caves, however, were ancient shrines used by modern pilgrims to obtain *gnas* from this sacred place. We are only beginning to understand the true importance of caves in Tibet’s sacred geography. To make useful comparisons to cave use in other regions of the world will require much more research into their multiple roles. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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An altar found in a cave temple near Piyang is draped in *khata* (white ceremonial scarves). *Tsa-tsa*, bank notes, and pages of writing are placed upon it.

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