

# Tibetan Royal Tombs at ‘Phyongs-rgyas: Investigations and Studies

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The burial place located in ‘Phyongs-rgyas 琼结, Tibet 西藏 is a well-known ancient cemetery at the Tibetan Plateau. This burial ground contains mausoleums of ten odd Tibetan brtsan-po such as Srong-rtsan Sgam-po. In recent years, several on-site investigations of these tombs and comparative studies between extant sites and earlier aeronautical photographs enable us to have verified the total number of the tombs as well as the location relationship among the tombs, and eventually to create a map indicating the distribution of the tombs and to re-identify the tomb occupant of each mausoleum.

## I. Distribution and Numbers of Tibetan Tombs at ‘Phyong-rgyals

Studies on relevant Tibetan texts have indicated that Tibetan mausoleums at ‘Phyong-rgyas are located in two places: Don-mkhar-mda and Mu-ri by the ‘Phyongs-rgyals-chu River north of Mt. Mu-ri in ‘Phyongs-rgyas County. While a few mausoleums are built on the mountain slope or by the mountain foot, most of these tombs are constructed on the river-plain of the ‘Pyongs-gyas Chu River and the Dung-dkar River. The average sea level of these riverbanks is 3800 m. Tombs built on the mountain slope are 3900 m above the sea level.

The burial is divided into two areas: the east area and the west area, with more tombs and more grandiose grave mounds in the west area. The Tibetan expression ‘Don-mkhar-mda’ (meaning the ‘mouth of Don-mkhar-mda ravine’) in Tibetan text is today’s Dung-dkar ravine, the mouth of which is where the east area is situated. Mu-ri refers to Mt. Muri, also known as Mt. Mu-ra-ri. That is to say, the both places recorded in the texts said to contain Tibetan mausoleums are in the vicinity of ‘Phyongs-rgyas County (Fig. 1).

The burial place consisting of these two areas measures 3.5 million sq m, 2500 m from west to east and 1500 m

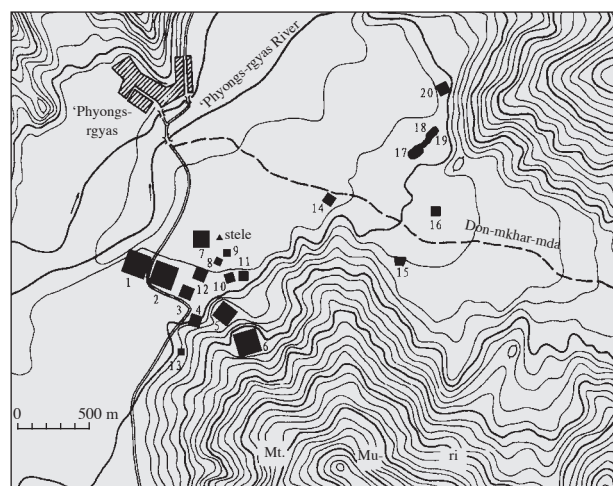


Fig. 1 Tibetan mausoleums in ‘Phyongs-rgyas

from north to south. The distance between the two areas is 800 m. Recent survey of the burial place reveals that there are seven tombs in the east area and thirteen in the west area (including two newly discovered tombs), thus making it impossible that the total number of tombs is less than twenty. By contrast, conventional statistics only records ten or eleven tombs in the west area and maintains seventeen as the maximum number.

## II. Current Condition of Tibetan Royal Burial Place

Most of the mausoleums still have imposing tomb mounds. In the cases of large mausoleums, the tomb mound can measure more than 100 m in perimeter and 10 m in height. Made of rammed soil and stone, the mounds are either square-shaped or trapezoid in ground plan. Majority of the tombs have been ransacked in history and large holes can still be seen on the top of the mounds.

Situated along the ‘Phyongs-rgyas River, tomb No.1 in the west area is built at the north end of the burial place. Its grave mound measures 95 m long, 67 m wide at the top,

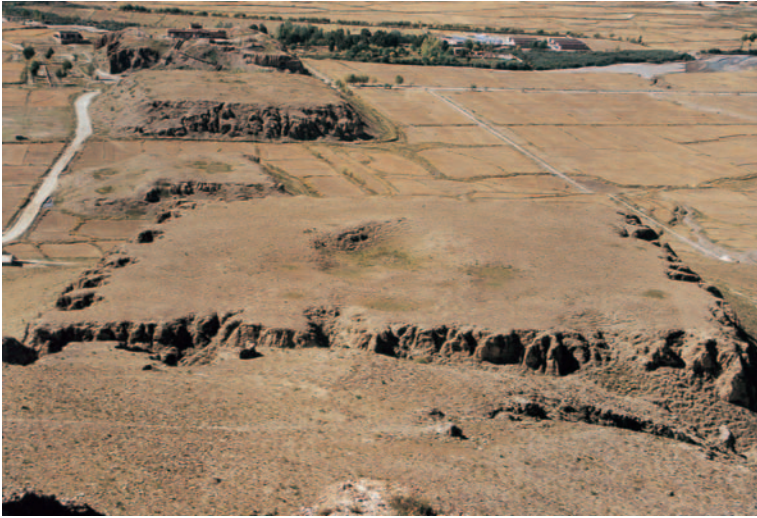


Fig. 2 Tibetan mausoleums Nos.1-3 and 5



Fig. 3 Tibetan mausoleum No.1



Fig. 4 The rammed mound of Tibetan mausoleum No.19

and 130 m long and 124 m wide at the bottom. Its current height is 18 m. The highest tomb in the burial place and built on the mountain slope of Mt. Mu-ra-ri, tomb No.6 is at the south end of the cemetery. It is 3938 m above sea level. The top of its mound measures 83 m from north to south and 90 m from east to west; the bottom of the mound measures 136 m from north to south and 118 m from east to west. Its current height is 36 m. To the mound's east and west sides, there are two stone-carved crouching lions, both measuring 1.45 m high and facing the tomb mound (Figs. 2 and 3).

Approximately one km to the northeast of the west area is the east burial place. To judge from the extant tomb mounds, there are seven mausoleums. Tomb No.15 is located at the foot of the southern mountain of Dung-dkar ravine. To its southeast is No.14. The ground plan of the mound is in trapezoid shape. Tomb No.19 is to the northeast of Nos.17 and 18. The ground plan of its mound is in square shape, measuring 94.5 m from north to south and 46.5 m from east to west; the mound's current height is about 6 m. Two concaves are found at the top of the mound. Given that this is the only tomb having a square shape and that its length measures twice as long as its width, we suspect it may consist of two juxtaposed tombs (Fig. 4).

### III. Tomb Occupants

In the early years of the 18th century, some foreigners already paid their visit these Tibetan royal tombs. The Italian scholar G. Tucci published *The Tombs of the Tibetan Kings* 藏王陵考 in 1950 after his investigation of the tombs in 1948. Afterwards, the British scholar H.E. Richardson investigated the tombs. In his publication *Early Burial Grounds in Tibet and Tibetan Decorative Art of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* 西藏早期墓地及八—九世纪西藏的装饰艺术, he published the first illustration of the tombs' distribution and identified the tomb occupants of ten tombs. Wang Yi 王毅 is one of the pioneer Chinese scholars

who conducted investigation and research of Tibetan mausoleums. Based on his *Investigation of the Mausoleums and the rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i-me-long* 西藏王统记, Wang identified 8 tomb occupants. A few ancient Tibetan documents, *the mDzad-pa'i rgya-bod kyi chos-'byung rgyas-pa* 第吴教法源流 by mKhas-pa-lde'u and *the Yar-lung jo-bo'i chos-'byung* 雅隆尊者教法史, among others, record these tombs at 'Phyongs-rgas. The burial place that is commonly known as 'Tibetan Mausoleums' refers to the west area, a cemetery said to have been first constructed during the reign period of Srong-brtsan-sgam-po. Beginning from Srong-brtsan-sgam-po down to the collapse of the Tibetan Empire, there are ten brtsan-po, they include:



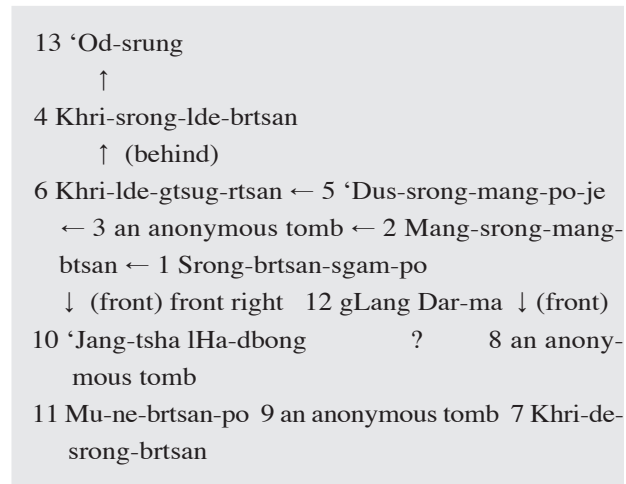
Except Gung-srong-gung-brtsan and Khri-srong-lde-brtsan who were buried in another cemetery, all the other kings were buried in the same cemetery as that of Srong-brtsan-sgam-po. Prince 'Jang-tsha lha-dbong of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan and prince 'Od-srung of gLang Dar-ma were also buried in this cemetery, thus making the total number of the tomb occupants into 11. In addition to Gung-srong-gung-brtsan and Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan, other royal members who were buried in Don-mkhar-mda may have also included Mu-tig-brtsan-po, Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan, gNam-ri-slom-mstan, sTag-risnyan-gzigs and his consort.

The Mu-ri cemetery started from Srong-brtsan-sgam-po and continued during the reign period of succeeding kings, whereas Don-mkhar-mda burial place, which only has few mausoleums, may have started from Khri-

gnyan-gzung-brtsan and served only as a burial place for those kings who died an untimely death.

1. There are 12 tomb mounds in west cemetery (Mu-ri cemetery). If counting the tomb of prince 'Od-srung, there are more than 13 tombs in this cemetery. The texts have revealed the following distribution: to the left of the tomb of Srong-brtsan-sgam-po are, in sequence, tombs of Mang-srong-mang-brtsan, 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je, and Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan. While the Srong-brtsan-sgam-po tomb is located in 'Phyongs-rgyas Valley, the Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan tomb is situated on the mountain slope of Mu-ri. It thus leads to the conclusion that the left direction in the texts refers to southeast, and right direction to northwest, that is to say, area close to the river is left and area close to the mountain right. Tombs from Srong-brtsan-sgam-po to Khri-srong-lde-brtsan are in the same alignment, with each tomb facing the north, a fact attested by the north-facing stele in front of the Khri-de-srong-brtsan tomb.

The reconstructed distribution of the tombs is as follows:



Tombs considered related to Mu-ri include those of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je, and Khri-srong-lde-brtsan. Several texts also record that the tomb of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan is built in Mu-ri Mountain and the name of this mausoleum is Lha-ri-gtsug-snam (Heavenly Top of the Sacred Mountain of Gods). The tomb should be tomb No.6, which is located at the highest point of the cemetery. The name of the 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je tomb is Lha-ri-can. It is tomb No.5, next to 'Lha-ri-gtsug-snam.' Also at Mu-ri, the tomb of Khri-srong-lde-brtsan known as 'Phul-ri gtsug-snam (The Mountain Top of the Sacred Apparition) is behind the tomb of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, his father. It should be tomb No.4 in the cemetery. The three tombs at the Mu-ri Mountain (tombs Nos.4–6)



are those of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je, and Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, matching exactly the textual records in their location.

Tombs of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je, and Mang-srong-mang-brtsan are all situated to the left of the tomb of Srong-brtsan-sgam-po; namely, the tomb of Srong-brtsan-sgam-po is at the right end of the series, therefore indicating a very clear way of mapping each tomb. Since we can safely identify tomb No.1 as belonging to Srong-brtsan-sgam-po, one of the two tombs, Nos.2 and 3, must belong to Mang-srong-mang-brtsan. It is almost certain that No.2 is the tomb of Mang-srong-mang-brtsan.

Texts tell us that those tombs directly related to the Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan tomb include 'Jang-tsha lha-dbong tomb in its front, Mu-ne-brtsan-po tomb in its right front, Khri-srong-lde-brtsan tomb in its right rear, and Khri-lde-srong-brtsan tomb in its right front. The tomb itself is to the left of the 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je tomb. We can therefore conclude that tomb No.10 belongs to 'Jang-tsha lha-dbong, No.11 to Mu-ne-brtsan-po, No.4 to Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, the far off No.7 to Khri-de-srong-brtsan, and finally the tomb next to it belongs to 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je.

Due to the presence of the Khri-lde-srong-brtsan stele by No.7, it is certain that this is the tomb of Khri-de-srong-brtsan. As to the tomb of 'Jang-tsha lha-dbong, texts tell either that it is situated in front of his father Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan's tomb (as in *the rGya-bod kyi tshang* 汉藏史集) or that it is in front of the tomb of 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je, his grandfather (as in *the rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i-me-long* 西藏王统记). These are not contradictory records. Both in fact point to tomb No. 10. Most of the texts agree that the tomb of Mu-ne-brtsan-po is in right front of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan's tomb. It therefore should be No.11.

While *the rGya-bod kyi tshang* 汉藏史集 tells that the tomb of the last king gLang Dar-ma, is in-between the tombs of 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je and Khri-lde-srong-brtsan, *the Yar-lung jo-bo'i chos-'byung* 雅隆尊者教法史 informs that it is in-between the tombs of 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je and Khri-srong-lde-brtsan. But both indicate a close relationship between the tomb of gLang Dar-ma and that of 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je. Moreover, aeronautic photographs indicate the presence of an additional tomb between the tombs of 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je and Khri-de-srong-brtsan. An *in-situ* observation also reveals the existence of that tomb, which is now numbered as No.12. It should belong to gLang Dar-ma. According

to *the rGya-bod kyi tshang* 汉藏史集 the tomb of gLang Dar-ma was never finished. It thus seems that his corpse was never interred inside the tomb.

As to the tomb of 'Od-srung, the son of gLang Dar-ma, the *mDzad-pa'i rgya-bod kyi chos-'byung rgyas-pa* 第吴教法源流 by mKhas-pa-lde'u says that it is behind 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je's tomb. Investigation shows that the topography in that place is a bit higher than its adjacent area and we can therefore hypothesize that it is where 'Od-srung's tomb is located.

In Mu-ri cemetery, according to the texts, tombs for the kings who inherited the throne from his father or grandfather are aligned horizontally. This hold true for tombs from Srong-brtsan-sgam-po to Mang-srong-mang-brtsan and tombs from 'Dus-srong-mang-po-je to Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, they are all arranged in the same alignment. Because Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan's tomb is near the mountain top, tombs of his successors were not built any longer to its left; rather, they were constructed in its front or back. For example, two sons of Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, 'Jang-tsha lha-dbong and Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, were both built in the vicinity of their father's tomb, one in its front and the other at back. In the same vein, tombs of Mu-ne-brtsan-po and Khri-de-srong-brtsan were built in front of the tomb of their father. The son of Khri-de-srong-brtsan, gLang-dar-ma, instead had his tomb built behind his father's tomb. The same holds for the tomb of 'Od-Srung.

In addition to those identifiable mausoleums, there are also three anonymous tombs in west cemetery. They are tombs Nos.3, 8, and 9, belonging, probably, to some other royal members.

2. There are 7 tombs in Don-mkhar-mda, the east cemetery, to which little attention has been paid by scholars. According to the texts, there are the following tombs in Don-mkhar-mda: those of Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan, gNam-ri-slön-mstan, sTag-ri-snyan-gzigs, Gung-srong-gung-brtsan, and Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan, among others.

Their distributional relationship, from left to right, runs as follows:

Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan → sTag-ri-snyan-gzigs and his consort → Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan → Gung-srong-gung-brtsan → gNam-ri-slön-mstan (to the right)

Since the historical documents tells that the tomb of Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan is situated at the left corner of or left side of Don-mkhar-mda, we can infer its location: it should be at the left side of the mouth of Dung-dkar ravine, that is, No.20 at the left end. To its right are tombs of sTag-ri-snyan-gzigs and his consort, numbered as Nos.19 and 18. The combination of two adja-

cent tombs probably incurs the uncommon square shape of tomb No.19; namely, the position now taken by tombs No.18 and No.19 originally consisted of three tombs, including the tomb of sTag-ri-snyan-gzigs and tombs of his consort and Mon-bu-rgyal-mtsan, as attested in historical documents. Tomb No.17 to their right is the tomb of Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan. The trapezoid-shaped tomb further right, which is numbered as No.15, is the mausoleum of gNam-ri-slon-mstan. Its trapezoid shape corroborates its being described as ‘collar bone shape’ in the texts. Texts also tell that the tomb of gNam-ri-slon-mstan is located to the right of the tomb of Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan, and that the tomb of Gung-srong-gung-brtsan lies to its left, thus making the Gung-srong-gung-brtsan tomb situated between the two tombs.

We do not know the tomb occupant of Tomb No.14 in the east burial place. Nevertheless, since the texts inform us that the tomb of Mu-tig-brtsan-po is also in this area, we may posit that tomb No.14 might have been the mausoleum of this brtsan-po.

#### IV. Conclusion

We may come to the following conclusions on the basis of relevant texts, aeronautic photographs, and on-site investigation.

1. There were indeed two areas of burial place in ‘Phyongs-rgas. They are the west area (Mu-ri) and the east area (Don-mkhar-mda). In these two areas diverge greatly in the identities of the tomb occupants: while they are mostly kings that reigned during the high times of the empire in the west area, tomb occupants in the east area are kings prior to Srong-brtsan-sgam-po together with princes who died an untimely death.

2. There are 20 tombs in the entire burial place, 13 tombs in the west area and 7 in the east area. If we count tomb No.19 as consisting of two tombs, then we have 21 tombs in total.

3. We are more certain regarding the identification of the tomb occupants in the west area. Identities of 10 out of 13 tomb occupants can be ascertained and all brstan-pos recorded in the texts can be found here (Table 1).

**Table 1 A roster of the ‘Phyongs-rgyas Tibetan tombs**

	No. of Tomb	mound	scale (perimeter\ width\height) (unit: m)	tomb occupant	name of the tomb	meaning of the name	previously proposed tomb occupants
West Area	1	square	130\124\18	Srong-brtsan-sgam-po	Mu-ri smug-po	Purple Mountain	Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, Srong-brtsan-sgam-po
	2	square	148.8\135\15	Mang-srong-mang-brtsan	sNgo-zhe ‘ral-po		Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, Mang-srong-mang-brtsan
	3	square	92\85\7	?	Seng-ge rtsigs-can ‘Dus-srong-mang-po-je	Lion-shaped Wall near the sacred mountain	‘Dus-srong-mang-po-je
	4	square	67\66\5	Khri-srong-lde-brtsan			Mu-ne-brtsan-po; Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan
	5	square	110\91.6\9	‘Dus-srong-mang-po-je	‘Phrul-ri gtsug-snang	in the vicinity of the top of Apparitional Mountain	Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan, Mang-srong-mang-brtsan
	6	square	136\118\36	Khri-lde-gtsug-brtsan	lHa-ri gtsug-nam	Celestial Top of the Divine Mountain	Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan
	7	square	99\89.5\11	Khri-lde-srong-brtsan	rGyal-chen ‘phrul-ri	The Great King’s tomb of ‘phrul Montain	Khri-lde-srong-brtsan

	8	square	41.9\33\4.8	?			anonymous, Mu-ne-brtsan-po
	9	square	21.8\19\3	Mu-ne-brtsan-po	lHa-ri ldem-po		gLang Dar-ma
	10	square	38.2\37\6	?			anonymous tomb; 'Jang-tsha lHa-dbong
	11	square ?	34\32.7\2.5	'Jang-tsha lha-dbong		circular terrace	
	12	square ?	36.5\30.9\5	gLang Dar-ma	Bang-so 'khor-lo-can		
	13	square ?	130\124\7	'Od-srung	sKye'u lha-rten		Ral-pa-can, anonymous tomb
East Area	14	trapezoid	87\54\76\4.7	Mu-tig-brtsan-po	sKya-ri ldem-po	collarbone-shaped snow mountain	
	15	trapezoid	66\58\54-56\?	gNam-ri-slon-mstan	Gung-ri sogs-kha		
	16	square	37.5\29.4\2.5	Gung-srong-gung-brtsan	Gung-ri gung-rje		
	17	?	64\48\7	Khri-gnyan-gzung-brtsan			
	18	?	44\28\4	'Bro-gnyan-lde'u	gSon-mchad zlum-po	circular tomb for the living	
	19	rectangular ?	94.5\46.5\6	sTag-ri-snyan-gzigs			
	20	square	55\54.5\14	Khri-gtsung-lde-brtsan	Khri-steng rmang-ri		

Note: the scale of those trapezoid-shaped mounds consists of long-side/short-side/waist size/height. All the numbers refer to the perimeter as measured by Zhao Huimin 赵慧民 in 2000. Some of them diverge greatly with previous measurements.

Note: The original paper, published in *Kaogu Xuebao* 考古学报 2002.4: 471–492 with 2 illustrations, 3 tables, and 10 plates, is written by Wang Renxiang 王仁湘, Zhao Huimin, Liu Jianguo 刘建国, and Guo You'an 郭幼安. The summary is prepared by the first author and English-translated by Wang Yudong 王玉东.