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Remembering Zhang Zhung: Cultural Memory and the Reconstruction of an Ancient Tibetan Civilization

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Abstract. This paper explores the process by which Zhang Zhung became a long lasting civilizational memory in Tibetan and Bon historical traditions, instead of the historically attested western polity. It does not see early imperial sources, later Bon narratives and archaeology as descriptions of one and the same object. Rather, it divides them into three archival evidences of a historical function. Political and narrative memories of conquest and incorporation are contained in the Old Tibetan Annals and Old Tibetan Chronicle. Subsequent Bon practices reconfigure the ancestral name in sacred geography, founding genealogies, language, and script and translation. They thus make a conquered area a place of religious antiquity and authority. Archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence demonstrates the long-term social complexity of western Tibet, and it calls into question the idea of a simple political, ethnic or religious affiliation to every site. Based on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, the paper suggests that Zhang Zhung survived through repeated reactivation rather than unchanged preservation. In methodological aspects, it focuses on a source-stratified model where disagreements between textual, religious and material archives serve as clues to change. The case also indicates that cultural memory can be produced not only by preservation, but by the interplay of the traces that survived, historical rupture and evidentiary absence.

Keywords: Zhang Zhung, Bon, cultural memory, Tibetan historiography, archaeology

1. Introduction

The history of Zhang Zhung is intricately tied to the Tibetan Plateau, and it is situated in an unusually unstable part of the Plateau in relation with political history, religious tradition, linguistic reconstruction and archaeology. The earliest Tibetan historical sources refer to Zhang Zhung as a western polity that was incorporated into the growing Yarlung state in the seventh century. As a sacred homeland, source of religious authority, linguistic and textual parent, and a culture of the far west of the plateau, the name is recalled later in Bon histories. A third stream of evidence, archaeology, reveals that western Tibet held complex communities long before and during the imperial expansion, as evidenced by settlements, cemeteries, crop remains, rock art, monuments and exchange networks. But these bodies of evidence can't replace each other. It is possible to have an early chronicle that preserves political memory, but doesn't describe an entire civilization. A later sacred history may demonstrate how a community viewed itself as having come from, without being

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a 7th century administrative record. Developing a social complexity of archaeological site does not require the identification of the ethnic or political name of its inhabitants [1-4].

In this paper, Bon is the religious tradition that was developed in Tibet that evolved different descriptions, different lineage, different institutions, different ritual systems and also different history. The term needs to be used cautiously for the imperial period. Sam van Schaik demonstrates that words like bon and bon po, which appear in Tibetan documents of the early period, can be used for ritual specialists and practices, but this does not automatically mean that they are the fully fledged Bon tradition of later centuries [5]. Continuity, and transformation, is also a focus for Samten Karmay. Later Bon drew on older ritual worlds, but these materials were institutionalized over time as a self-aware textual and institutional tradition rather than surviving unchanged from a single pre-Buddhist system [2]. The distinction is important because the paper does not ask the question whether each subsequent Bon claim can be projected backwards. It asks what happened to the organization of older materials in the later historical memory.

This conflict among these sources is a telling example of the study of cultural memory in the context of Zhang Zhung. It isn't just a question of whether Zhang Zhung had existed. With the early Tibetan materials, there is not an easy denial of a western political entity. The more challenging questions have to do with the aftermath of political incorporation: How was a conquered kingdom converted into a sacred geography, a linguistic ancestor, and a civilizational memory? Later Bon communities revisited Zhang Zhung again and again as a source of authority, why? What do the later memories tell of the change from a political past to a religious and cultural one, when it is set against the early political texts and material evidence? The questions need more than a summary of the evidence to be answered by the conclusion. It ought to clarify how that transformation took place.

This paper posits that Zhang Zhung has remained alive within its own political incorporation through three evidentiary archives which generate three types of memory. The Old Tibetan Annals and Old Tibetan Chronicle, as parts of the imperial textual archive, document a political Zhang Zhung: a competing state, a dynastic issue, a conquered territory, and a part of imperial state formation. The attachment of the inherited name by the later Bon textual-ritual archive to sacred geography, founder genealogies, language, scripts, translation and claims of antiquity, preserves a civilizational Zhang Zhung. Both narratives are missing from the archaeological-material archive. Rather, it demonstrates the social complexity and regional diversity of western Tibet, and curtails efforts to define all ancient sites as exclusively belonging to one community, whether political, ethnic or religious. The core argument is that such disagreements between these archives constitute history, too. They demonstrate that cultural memory is neither simple preservation nor deliberate fabrication, but rather involves the selection, reorganisation and reactivation of traces in a new social context.

The comparison is carried out in the light of the theory of cultural memory proposed by Jan Assmann. For Assmann, information regarding the past is not necessarily cultural memory. A past becomes culturally powerful when communities choose certain events, names, places, or symbols from their past and fix them in a more durable form (texts and ritual forms), interpret them over and over again, and link them to a collective identity [6]. This distinction helps to explain Zhang Zhung. The name was not just stored after the loss of the sovereignty of the polity. It still reflected its activation in various media. Pilgrimage geography anchored memory in a place that was still accessible, script traditions offered an ancient literate civilisation, linguistic traditions offered Zhang Zhung as a source language, Bon histories made conquest memorable, and imperial narratives remembered conquest. Zhang Zhung thus fulfils Assmann's model since the crucial issue is not only

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that information survives but that a past is remembered and kept alive through repeated social re-use.

This paper uses sources in their own layers and not merging them into one story. Begins with original primary Tibetan historical sources, the Old Tibetan Annals and the Old Tibetan Chronicle, and compares these with other Bon historical traditions, later in history, that have been discussed by scholars like Karmay, Blezer, Martin, and van Schaik, and subsequently subjects both traditions to archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence. There are different questions for each source. For political chronology, the best sources are the imperial annals; conquest was made memorable by the narrative chronicles, later by Bon texts, which also offer the best evidence for post-imperial religious self-understanding, and finally by archaeology, which is best for reconstructing settlement, subsistence, mortuary practice, and regional complexity. This is a method to explain the varying connotations of Zhang Zhung. The imagined object of preservation by imperial compilers, post-imperial Bon writers and ritual groups, pilgrims, philologists, or modern archaeologists is not the same. Some of the groups used different traces and created a relationship with the given name that was different.

2. Historical Zhang Zhung: political memory and imperial conquest

2.1. Source stratification and chronology

The first methodological issue is that Zhang Zhung is the name of several historical objects. It is found in early Tibetan documents, in reference to a western polity that was engaged in the process of political consolidation of the Tibetan Empire. In the subsequent Bon tradition, Zhang Zhung is employed as a religious genealogy, sacred geography, translation story, history of ancient kings, and language and script claims. Modern scholarship has also used the name for linguistic materials or, less conservatively, for an archaeological site or regional culture in western Tibet or the western Himalayas. These uses overlap both geographically and historically, but not exactly. If they're treated as the same, then it would be possible to use a late text to interpret an early tomb, or to use an archaeological site to verify a late sacred geography.

This separation of these layers has been especially useful using the work of Henk Blezer. Blezer does not reject the presence in history of Zhang Zhung. Rather, he argues, the western polity of early sources is relatively well attested, while the more elaborate sacred and civilizational geography of later Bon discourse represents a later phase [3]. That distinction prevents the mixing of evidence of various centuries into one continuous narrative, not supported by any one source. The meaning of an old name, place, ritual association or memory of loss may be valueably maintained in a late religious account even in the complete absence of accurate information about the boundaries of a seventh-century kingdom. Source value is dependent on the question asked of the source.

Chronology is important because it reduces the type of claim that a source can reasonably substantiate. The Old Tibetan Annals were drawn up close to the imperial period and list events chronologically. The Old Tibetan Chronicle is also very literary, yet it also forms part of the early Tibetan historiographical tradition that preserved at Dunhuang. In contrast, however, many Bon histories that give Zhang Zhung its fullest sacred and civilisational interpretation are found in much later versions, particularly during the post-imperial centuries, when Bon traditions were textualised and institutionally expressed [2, 5]. The chronological distance does not render the subsequent sources futile. It indicates that they are more a proof of the history of memory, religious identity and historiography than of a precise political map for the seventh century.

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The chronological gap alters the questions which historians can ask of later Bon sources. It is only a weak indication of the territorial boundaries of a kingdom in the seventh century but a strong indication of how a later religious community saw its origins in a later Bon history. These texts may be used to maintain inherited place-names, ritual words, geographic connections, linguistic bits, or stories, and to restructure these in a new sacred chronology. A better question than "Is it a true or a false account?" is "What is the historical work of this account? Does it legitimate or trace a lineage, explicate a ritual, find a sacred center, set a language's antiquity, or close-read political loss as religious rupture? This is a move from verification to function, which is fundamental to the paper's memory based approach.

The same applies to archaeology. While a cemetery can determine the chronology, the mortuary practice, and social differentiation, it can only show its creators by a political name if there are independent evidences which link the site with the name. The features of a fortified settlement, the evidence of organized labor, of stored resources, and of regional power do not necessarily indicate a Zhang Zhung capital. In the case of Zhang Zhung ethnicity, the methodological boundary is evident as Mark Aldenderfer discusses the problem of ethnicity not being readily visible in one tomb type, in one ceramic style, or in one artifact type [4]. Archaeology is most useful here when it can check, rather than simply illustrate, the claims of the Texts.

2.2. The Old Tibetan Annals: political and administrative memory

Thus, the earliest Tibetan materials offer the lowest possible starting point for a historical Zhang Zhung. The Old Tibetan Annals are particularly important because of their year-by-year political context, which gives Zhang Zhung its place in the same political world as that of the royal movements, councils, campaigns, regional affairs, and administration. The Annals don't depict Zhang Zhung as a far away mythical civilization. They view it as a political-geographic entity in the imperial space [1, 7]. This is precisely how the Annals can be used to set a political baseline. Though they reveal much less about the internal religion, language, or social organization of Zhang Zhung, they make it clear that the name was not part of the vocabulary of fictional imperial relations.

According to the annalistic records, Zhang Zhung was introduced into the Tibetan imperial order in the middle of the seventh century in the reign of Songtsen Gampo [1]. This date is significant from both a chronological and method point of view. It provides a fairly clear point of political disjuncture: Zhang Zhung was no longer a stand-alone state in the same sense as it had been prior to incorporation, but the name was still available for future use. Instead of using later sacred histories to get a sense of the conquest in reverse, the paper takes the early political record as a baseline and asks: what was added to it by the later traditions in terms of what conquered?

2.3. The Old Tibetan Chronicle: narrative and performative memory

The Old Tibetan Chronicle is a different type of memory of a similar political world. Unlike the Annals' succinct year-by-year synopsis, the Chronicle is a mixture of genealogy, prose narration, songs, speeches and eulogistic material. In this Zhang Zhung episode, conquest is not necessarily a "old fashioned" administrative convenience. It is told through dynastic marriage, personal loyalty, coded communication, danger and royal decision. In examining the Chronicle in terms of its oral and literary aspects, Dotson reveals the ways that the text documents both what an imperial tradition remembered and the narrative forms that allowed the memory to be repeated and meaningful [8-10].

In the midst of the episode, is the character of Princess Sad-mar-kar, sister of Songtsen Gampo and wife of the Zhang Zhung ruler, Lig myi rhya. The Chronicle frames the affinity between Tibet

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and Zhang Zhung not only as a type of affinal kinship, but also as a political rivalry, and Sad-mar-kar's marriage as the unstable point of the connection between these two. Her role is to make the conflict comprehensible, both socially and militarily: a dynastic marriage that was supposed to be the basis of an alliance is a testament to their failure. Dotson situates the episode within the larger "unhappy bride" story type, where a woman from the royal house becomes the site of order and/or political maneuvering when she is wed to a far-off king [10].

The narrative form makes imperial expansion a "legible" moral narrative. Marriage in the episode is a part of the political action. Sad-mar-kar's unsuccessful marriage is an indicator of a failure in the alliance between the Tibetan royal house and Zhang Zhung, and her messages to her brother make her failure a justification for royal action. It is not just the Chronicle that documents that Tibet defeated Zhang Zhung. It frames the loss as a repair effort of a tarnished political relationship. This is important framing because it leaves the impression – for subsequent audiences – that conquest was happening, and it may even be considered legitimate.

The Chronicle focuses on Zhang Zhung but makes it part of an imperial narrative. Through his involvement in a Tibetan princess, Lig myi rhya emerges; Zhang Zhung's political destiny is tied to the Yarlung royal family; and its downfall is told from the perspective of the conqueror. This subordination also helps to maintain the memory. The conquered polities can continue to be evident in the imperial narratives as expanding states tend to tell stories which account for their own success through the conquered polities. The Zhang Zhung that remain here are a vanquished rival and testament to the extent, diplomacy and ultimately triumph of the Tibetan court. Indeed, this is the Chronicle's unique take on political memory.

The music and coded signals used in the Sad-mar-kar episode enhance this memorialising process. Dotson points out that Sad-mar-kar is singing a series of songs, the language of which has a double meaning. Words seemingly praising Zhang Zhung in front of Zhang Zhung audience can mean criticism to her Tibetan cousins. A coded message and symbolic objects are later interpreted by the Tibetan court as an impetus to take action against Lig myi rhya [10]. This illustrates the songs are not just flourishes. Political information is integrated in performance, wordplay and symbol. The conquest is celebrated not only as a military achievement but as a moment of interpretation, where listeners have to decipher the princess' significance.

It is important to compare the Annals with the Chronicle to see why it is not possible to separate the earliest archive into an "objective" history and a "constructed" memory. The Annals arrange the past by the annalistic selection, which determines which Councils, movement, campaigns and administration events are recorded year by year. The Chronicle arranges it in a narrative order in which events are provided with motives, characters, songs, kinship systems and moral order. Both are selective but they select differently. This is relevant to the next step in the paper: Memory-making did not start centuries after the conquest. The name of later Bon was thus borrowed from an earlier and already politically constructed, narrated and meaningful Tibetan historiography.

2.4. From conquest to a reusable past

It is as significant as the conquest itself that the name Zhang Zhung continued to exist after conquest. Political incorporation may result in the loss of sovereignty but not regional terminology. Even after the independent polity ceased to exist, a name that had stuck to the western landscape could still be in circulation in geography, historical writing, ritual memory and local tradition. This perseverance is a source of its reinterpretation later. It was not necessary for the post-imperial Bon writers and compilers to create a completely new western history, particularly for those communities

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that transmitted the mDzod phug and later organized the gZer mig and gZi brjid narratives. They could revitalise a name, which over time, had come to have a less political referent [2, 11, 3].

There is, then, more than one historical memory that emerged out of conquest. From the viewpoint of imperial state formation, Zhang Zhung could signify successful integration into the larger order of Tibet. From the perspective of the post-imperial Bon treasure-revealers, monastic scholars, and textual communities that have been linked to texts like the mDzod phug, gZer mig, and gZi brjid, the same rupture could be reimagined as the loss of an older religious and civilizational center [2, 11, 3]. Not necessarily opposing tales of a single event. They are more diverse in their social purposes, with integration being the theme of imperial historiography, and displacement, antiquity, sacred geography, and the recovery of teachings, being the theme of these later Bon textual communities. This change from political incorporation to religious loss is the first big step in the kingdom-to-civilizational memory.

3. Bon cultural memory: religion, language, script, and sacred geography

3.1. Post-imperial Bon and the construction of religious genealogy

The historical production of the identity of the Tibetans was affected by the fall of the Tibetan Empire in the ninth century. There were divisions in political unity, reorganizations of religious institutions and translation networks, and regional communities expressed their own textual genealogies and histories. It was in this post-imperial context that the Bon began to assume a more familiar guise as a self-aware text and religion. Karmay's historical research focuses on the fact that the Bon literature, ritual systems, institutions and doctrines were not simply the unaltered descendants of one pre-Buddhist system. Over time inherited ritual materials were reorganized and rearticulated [2]. That process gave rise to a real need for historical genealogies which could provide an explanation of where authority was derived.

This isn't to say that later Bon just "showed up". Van Schaik's work on imperial terminology is helpful, because it distinguishes institutional continuity from ritual continuity. Although the imperial religious field can be divided between bon po and other ritual specialists, as early sources mention, the later binary of Buddhism versus an already unified Bon institution does not apply here [5]. Inheritance of an older ritual vocabulary or specialized roles, myths, deities and practices might be possible by later Bon communities who could reorganize these into a coherent religious identity. It does not suggest that all the later categories would have existed in the same form centuries ago, but continuity as a process of selection and institutionalisation.

In that process Zhang Zhung might be giving Bon a number of forms of legitimacy simultaneously. It might serve as a political predecessor (ancient), a sacred homeland (west), source of teacher and lineage, a language of transmission, a landscape of powerful ritual places. Change thus operates on a level of scale and a level of function: on the first level, early sources have preserved a political region, and the second, late Bon memory has turned that region into a frame for explaining religious origins. This interpretation does more than list Bon claims; it is a summary of the book. What matters historically is that there were multiple claims of authority that coalesced around a single inherited name.

The pre-political sources do not speak of the considerable and elaborate sacred civilization as described in later Bon literature. Blezer stresses that many of the specifics regarding Zhang Zhung's holy west, its vast geography and its centrality to religion are part of later layers of tradition [3]. But the later symbol didn't fall out of the sky. The memory of conquest, the name and the existence of a western polity gave it a stable core to cling to, around which later meanings could coalesce. Each

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succeeding detail need not be of a very ancient origin for cultural continuity. It can start with a smaller inherited core which can be interpreted and given meaning.

There were also grounds for stressing the distinctiveness of Zhang Zhung, in the post-imperial religious landscape. But in an intellectual context in which Buddhist traditions were often tied to Indian and Sanskrit-based depth and transmissions, Bon might have seemed an alternative source for depth and independence in the form of Zhang Zhung. The argument is neither that Bon authors merely copied Buddhist models, nor that they were consciously making a counter-history up. Instead, an independent western past was more useful in that it could account for the existence of a genealogy of Bon knowledge. Formerly politically separatist Zhang Zhung was therefore religiously fruitful: political distance could be converted into cultural and doctrinal antiquity.

This process is manifested in later connections between Zhang Zhung, gShen rab Mi bo, Western sacred landscape and tales of religious transmission. As Blezer's study of gShen traditions demonstrates, fully formed hagiographical identities have grown from more complex earlier ritual and narrative texts [3]. What is important about Zhang Zhung is that those materials might be arranged around a fixed west. The remembered region became a homeland, the ritual specialists ancestors in a lineage, and gShen rab Mi bo could serve as a founder that provided a historical sequence to elements of tradition that were dispersed. The sacred history produced made it easier to pass on ritual material that had been inherited: it established a place of origin and a genealogical centre.

This is what cultural-memory theory can account for. In Assmann's structure there is no necessity for the historian to decide between a totally preserved and a totally invented past. Cultural memory is created by selected, stabilized, repeated and identity-bearing institutional, textual, ritual, and place-making [6]. Older names, ritual functions, western geographies, and stories weren't just put away in the case of Zhang Zhung. They were organized into a religious history which could legitimise subsequent communities. For that the framework of Assmann is fruitful as analytical tool: how fragments become a coherent historical inheritance.

Such recognition also helps historians to avoid the temptation to ascribe later categories back. The expression 'the Bon religion of Zhang Zhung' is simple, but it is a religion that has undergone centuries of transformation into a single word. The analysis of bon and chos in imperial texts made by Van Schaik demonstrates the need for care with language. Ritual specialists and non-Buddhist practices are mentioned in early sources but do not show the presence of an already fully institutionalized Bon organization in the later sense [5]. The more limited claim is the following: even old ritual worlds could be a source for later Bon traditions without their institutional identity being equivalent to that of later Bon.

Karmay comes to a similar conclusion from the history of Bon literature, and the history of Bon doctrine. Later Bon traditions make claims of deep foundational roots but the way these roots were knotted into institutions, canons, lineages or systematic histories has been greatly altered over time [2]. If the historian posits a seventh-century Bon institution that has stayed constant at the outset of analysis, then that is a conclusion that is already a premise. A more significant query is, how specific practices, specialists, texts and stories became ancestral. That question renders the nature of historical change manifest and not merely invention of later Bon identity.

This becomes more apparent with a named inheritance. The west in question is the cultural geography of far western Tibet, in particular the part which later became known as the cultural geography of Mount Kailash, Lake Manasarovar, the Sutlej valleys and Khyunglung. Later Bon sacred history views the founder figure as gShen rab Mi bo. The inherited vocabulary is the very early bon and bon po as well as Zhang Zhung lexical items and translation formulas that have been

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carried down in later textual traditions. These all combine to make the continuity real: a historical west is a sacred homeland, ritual experts are ancestors, a founder is the focus of genealogy, and bits of language seem to be signs of textual antiquity. Conservation of culture here involves structuring of the inherited material into a new historical context.

3.2. Language as ancestry and intellectual authority

Language was one of the key means of building that framework. The Bon texts contain Zhang Zhung words, bilingual glosses, the translation formulas, and the assertion that there were translations from Zhang Zhung to Tibetan. As a result of these traditions, both early and contemporary scholars have wondered if it is possible to make any direct links between the seventh-century polity and recoverable Zhang Zhung linguistic material. Dan Martin is skeptical of the evidence. A meaningful linguistic material does exist, but only in the form of later lexical collections and Bon texts, the connection of which with the spoken languages of early western Tibet cannot simply be taken for granted [11]. This caution is not to say that the material is rejected. It distinguishes language survival and subsequent historical interpretation.

There are thus layers of linguistic evidence. Language can be communicative but in historical memory it can also make a claim of ancestry and authority. The most obvious case is the mDzod phug (Cavern of Treasures) which contains a fairly large amount of Zhang Zhung–Tibetan bilingual material in its text and commentary. It is not only a list of words but also serves as a teaching translation from Zhang Zhung to Tibetan. It puts the scripture into a prior world of knowledge [11]. The Zhang Zhung in this way becomes a source language, forming chronological depth and a certain independence from the more familiar Buddhist translation relationship between Sanskrit and Tibetan. The arguments for this cultural role are the consistent association of Zhang Zhung terms with Tibetan counterparts throughout the text and the authority given to the Zhang Zhung in the transmission. This is not a clear indication that all preserved forms represent 7th century speech. It is an indication that the later Bon textual tradition regarded Zhang Zhung not only geographically but also intellectually as earlier [11].

If the comparison of Zhang Zhung materials and West Himalayish languages is taken as a whole, the linguistically diverse western Tibetan and Himalayan region is plausible, however, linguistic relationship cannot automatically be converted into political identity [11]. A common vocabulary does not create a common kingdom and a late lexical list is not a record of what was said in the 7th century. In one polity, there may have been a number of language communities and ritual terminology may have remained when ordinary speech was modified. This matters as a distinction, as if one did not exist, then the linguistic similarity would be used as circular evidence: a word would be classed as Zhang Zhung because it is western, and a region would be classed politically as Zhang Zhung because the word is found there. A source-stratified method does not take that shortcut.

As such, the linguistic archive documents two histories. One involves the vexed philological issue of what language or languages can be reconstructed on the basis of the material that has been preserved. The other is about the history of the concept of Zhang Zhung as a language. It is often easier to determine the second history. The concept of Zhang Zhung language was later repeatedly invoked by various Bon communities to envision a tradition that had a source of knowledge independent of and prior to Tibet. This distinction is significant because the cultural power of a remembered language is not dependent on the ability of the historians to reconstruct all the details of the ancient grammar.

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3.3. Script as a visual technology of memory

The same reasoning holds true with scripts. Subsequent Bon stories refer to scripts like Smar chen and Smar chung and link them to an old literary culture of the west. At first glance, these traditions provide direct evidence of a pre-imperial Zhang Zhung written tradition. The chronologic evidence is less certain. Blezer, Kalsang Norbu Gurung and Saraju Rath demonstrate that the few surviving examples of scripts associated with Zhang Zhung are much later than the ancient period to which origin stories attribute them [12]. Their argument does not demonstrate that this pre-writing was impossible. It shows that continuous use from an ancient Zhang Zhung empire to later Bon text culture cannot be demonstrated from the existing samples.

The use of the script question remains important as writing has symbolic power. An independent community with its own script can be envisioned as a community that could produce and preserve knowledge prior to the incorporation of that knowledge into Tibetan translation. The end result is a historical structure that is now quite apparent: Zhang Zhung not only becomes a conquered polity but also a literate source civilization. It's not only if a script is ancient enough. It is also the reason why later communities demanded that the old west be 'literate'. Script makes something abstraction, which was once a body of knowledge, visible.

The emphasis on the different source languages, translators, texts, and lineages of this narrative is similar to the manner in which Tibetan Buddhist translation histories were written, and similarity does not imply simple borrowing. In both traditions, the power of textual transmission can be seen to set the boundaries of religious authority in post-imperial Tibet. Bon memory was a memory, however, in which Zhang Zhung was not a purely Indian source of authority. This provides a certain function for the script-and-translation tradition: it provides Bon with a textual genealogy that relies not only on their chronological seniority but also on their cultural seniority.

A late example of a Zhang Zhung related script is historically useful although it does not prove that the script was used in the 7th century. It reveals what a commanding past would have been like for subsequent communities. Script is a visual technology of memory, materializing an ancient literate civilization. The historian is required to differentiate between two questions. Is there an ancient archive if there is a surviving script specimen? What role did the script tradition play in the thought of the later Bon community to imagine the authority of Zhang Zhung? The answers to the first question does not remove the historical importance of the second.

3.4. Sacred geography: Kailash, Khyunglung, and the persistence of place

Another sense of continuity was provided by sacred geography. Memory of the culture is not only in the texts. It can also be related to mountains, lakes, valleys, ruins and pilgrimage routes. Subsequent investigations on Zhang Zhung focused on far western Tibet, particularly on Mount Kailash, Lake Manasarovar, the Sutlej valleys and locations pertaining to Khyunglung. Tsering Thar points to the broader cultural significance of the Kailash region and its role in the cultural networks of Tibetan Plateau and Ladakh, western Himalayas, and South Asia and Central Asia [13]. Regardless of whether not each subsequent territorial claim is literally granted, this transregional geography does provide a way to account for the west being remembered as distinctive and connected.

The memory of Zhang Zhung was given a solid foundation by Mount Kailash. Mountains can still exist but political institutions can be absent. The later traditions which associated Zhang Zhung with Kailash gave a lost civilization a place of its own, a place where it might be recovred, a place that could be touched, experienced, visited, told about in stories and rituals. More than a poetic association, it's a true one. It alters the time frame of memory: the kingdom exists in the past; the

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landscape is in the present. The memory of Zhang Zhung can thus be reactivated without the survival of the ancient state through sacred geography, which makes the absence of the state a constant presence.

The example of Khyunglung is a clear example of the interaction of remembered place and archaeological location. Later Bon reports recognize Khyunglung Ngulkhar ("Silver Castle of Garuda Valley") as a significant Zhang Zhung site; and contemporary authors have attempted to associate ruins in western Tibet with the fabled capital city. The implications of the identifications are not as simple as they sound, Blezer warns; "extensive accounts of a great Zhang Zhung empire, and of Khyunglung itself, are rather late" [3]. The problem is not that ruins do not matter. There must be evidence to tie a remembered name to the physical location and not just similarity.

The methodological risk is circular reasoning. If a later text mentions a Zhang Zhung center, a Zhang Zhung ruin in that area can then be called Zhang Zhung; or vice versa, if the Zhang Zhung ruin is present, this text can be assumed to be true. The remains have to be dated and analyzed first by archaeologists. Cultural-memory analysis means that a different question is being asked; it does not supplant archaeological verification. At what point did communities start seeing a certain landscape as Khyunglung, what traditions supported that identification, and what religious or historical significance did the identification generate? This separation allows the same place to be examined as a material site and a remembered place, without collapsing one into the other.

It is important to make the distinction between archaeological location and remembered place. Mountains and ruins are not self-evident; communities relate them to narratives, genealogies, practices, and assertions of descent. In western Tibet, the persistence of the landscape provided Zhang Zhung with a durability that an administrative text alone could not offer. The material features may precede, exceed or only partially correspond to the later stories, but they did provide tangible surfaces to which historical significance could be given. It is in this class of situations that material continuity and interpretive continuity converge without coalescing.

4. Material evidence and the reconstruction of Zhang Zhung

4.1. Agriculture, settlement, and regional complexity

Archaeology plays an essential role in the study of Zhang Zhung for the evidentiary archive it has created, which was independent of later Bon historical writing. Material evidence may support, complicate or challenge textual traditions, but researchers should not make it do so. Archaeology can make two contributions: firstly, it provides evidence for the complexities and depth of social life in western Tibet; secondly, it prevents the majority of ancient communities in the west from being automatically equated with one identity, political, ethnic, or religious. Archaeology demonstrates complexity while at the same time curbing romantic reconstruction and over-suspicion in matters of identity.

Study of the archaeobotanical finds has contributed to understanding settlement and subsistence in western Tibet. Tang and colleagues make direct observations on plant remains from five high-altitude locations that span from the late first millennium BCE to the early first millennium CE. In some settlements like Jiweng, Dingdong, Piyang, and Zhabu, the predominance of barley and barley remains suggest that barley was being cultivated in the Zhada Basin by about 400 BCE. The study also reveals that the more diversified the crop assemblage of a site the larger the settlement, with smaller high-altitude settlements showing less crop diversity [14]. This is a direct material evidence, not a later historical tradition. It indicates that communities in western Tibet had established long-

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term strategies for agriculture in a challenging ecological environment and that the size of settlement was related to various economic opportunities.

This evidence calls into question two images of the western plateau. Subsequent civilizational narratives may either turn into a single, homogeneous and highly evolved ancient western civilization or into a marginal pastoral frontier in a very skeptical narrative. Tang's data do not justify either extreme. Agriculture, varied settlement types, elite centers, exchange and specialized mortuary practice make substantial regional organization plausible, but none of them defines the political identity, boundaries or beliefs of the communities responsible for their creation. The archaeological record thus is not evidence for the later Bon map. More specifically, it illustrates that the blank canvas of later recollections of an important western past was not blank, but that communities in the region had already evolved long-term farming, settlement variation, exchange systems and special mortuary practices [14].

Thus a site in western Tibet of the correct date cannot be Zhang Zhung simply by virtue of its location, if it was not a pre-conquest site. The boundaries of political identities and material cultures rarely coincide precisely. Several local traditions may be in one kingdom and pottery, burial practices, crops, technologies, and decorative styles may cross political boundaries as a result of exchange and migration. This aspect also agrees with the paper's main theme concerning memory: traditions later on were able to politically and economically unify a historically diverse region under the inherited name Zhang Zhung, even though the dwellers of the region may never have seen themselves as one homogeneous culture. Cultural memory can provide continuity and unity to an originally more plural past.

The density of the archaeological landscape is evident in John Vincent Bellezza's regional work, and manifests in monuments, rock art, ritual sites, tombs and settlement traces throughout western and northern Tibet [15]. It is difficult to view the western frontier as empty with such a quantity of pre-imperial and early historic material culture. These surveys at the same time demonstrate that traditional text should be used to ask questions and not answers. While a text can draw attention to a valley, a route, a ruin, there needs to be material evidence to support the chronology, function and regional context as well.

The most significant archaeological interpretation is contained and pertinent. Pre-conquest Tibet in the West had complex communities prior to the 7th century. They grew crops, herd animals, created substantial settlement, participated in long-distance networks, and practiced diverse ritual and mortuary practices [14, 15]. While it supports key western polities, such as the Zhang Zhung described in early Tibetan sources, it does not substantiate all later territorial or religious claims. What is being presented is plausibility versus identification: archaeology can make a complex western polity plausible without labelling every complex site as Zhang Zhung.

It's a strength of the limitation. The best use of archaeology is to challenge the texts, which it is most likely to do when it is independent enough. The material evidence turns into illustration if all the western sites are labeled Zhang Zhung before excavation. More specific questions are more helpful: What settlements controlled exchange routes? What burial practices did communities share? In which areas did agriculture spread? What practices shifted with imperial incorporation? These questions reconstruct the social world of political Zhang Zhung, and leave space for an internally divided material landscape.

4.2. Mortuary practice and the limits of ethnic attribution

The addition of mortuary archaeology provides another layer as burial practice can display social differentiation, ritual behaviour, and regional interaction. Aldenderfer places a strong emphasis on

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the significant differences in mortuary architecture found throughout the Tibetan Plateau and high Himalayas, ranging from less visible graves to monumental tomb practices [16]. This variation calls into question the view of ancient Tibet being a single cultural block. The bodies of the dead were treated differently in various communities, elements of rituals were borrowed from other communities and ritual forms changed over time. In other words, that plurality is made apparent through burial evidence, where later civilizational narratives tend to emphasize unity.

The social world of Zhang Zhung was likely an internally diverse one rather than a single civilizational entity as such a label implies. Western Tibet and the adjacent Himalayas were home to distinct ecological zones, trade networks, linguistic groups, ritual communities, and political centers. Even if archaeologists are able to identify regional patterns, they need to ask whether ancient people saw them as ethnicities or not, and whether the political term Zhang Zhung was synonymous with them or not [4]. While material similarity can be evidence of interaction or shared practice, it does not necessarily mean there is shared self-identification.

The caution is important because later Bon tradition links specific ritual acts or material forms to an ancestral Zhang Zhung civilization. Some links may be true historic inheritances but the antiquity of the later label attached to the practice cannot be determined solely by its age. The continuity claims need to be contrasted with those in chronology, geography, texts, and material evidence. Archaeology alone can prove the existence of a funerary or ritual practice, but cannot prove that the people practicing it identified with a later category "Bon" or the entire civilizational significance of "Zhang Zhung.".

At the same time, mortuary archaeology offers an explanation as to how later arguments for deep ritual foundations might be convincing. Death, dangerous spirits, specialist intervention and the reestablishment of order were all prominent features of early Tibetan ritual worlds; and later Bon traditions adopted aspects of these ritual inheritances into more structured genealogies and teachings [5, 3]. While there are signs of complex mortuary behaviors found in the archaeological record, this does not necessarily mean there was a continuous Bon institution, but rather that mortuary ritual practice was socially significant long before the later Bon textual systems came into being. The material record therefore provides historical depth without providing institutional identity.

Here the archaeological and the textual memory intersect, but do not merge. The significance and variety of funerary practice is shown in tombs; early manuscripts record the language of ritual and the existence of specialist roles; later Bon traditions incorporate some of this material into genealogies, teachings and sacred narratives. None of the three archives is a continuous institution in itself. They do collectively uphold a more precise argument: that later Bon claims to antiquity had developed in an historically old ritual environment, but the form of that environment that was remembered was organized later.

4.3. One Zhang Zhung: three archives, three kinds of memory

The political, cultural and archaeological memory of Zhang Zhung is well preserved in three archives. But that's not all they do. They change the definition of what is and isn't together and transform it into Zhang Zhung.

The first is Zhang Zhung in imperial political memory: a western polity whose memory is inscribed in the Old Tibetan Annals and the Old Tibetan Chronicle, and experienced through the processes of state formation, dynastic marriage, conflict, conquest, and incorporation. Its political life is relatively secure in political outline, while little can be gleaned from the early sources on its internal religion, ethnicity or language, as later traditions often suggest more.

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The second one is the Bon cultural memory of Zhang Zhung. This is where the name has a much broader significance: sacred geography, a homeland of religious lineages, the world of gShen rab Mi bo, an ancient source language, a script tradition, and an alternative genealogy of textual authority. Karmay and Blezer consider these developments from different perspectives, but both argue that the religious importance of Zhang Zhung that is part of a post-imperial history of textual and institutional formation and not one that has remained unchanged ancient system [2, 3]. This archive is a source of identity-bearing memory: it is a statement to the later communities about what Zhang Zhung meant for the identity of later communities.

The third is archaeological Zhang Zhung. This is not a fixed archaeological culture. It is a research problem that is confined to the material records of western Tibet and the neighboring areas. Aldenderfer's article demonstrates that artifacts do not necessarily reflect political or ethnic affiliations, and Tang et al. offer first-hand data on the complexity of agriculture and settlement [4, 14]. The archaeological archive provides spatial and material plausibility as well as limitations. It depicts the type of societies that were in the region, but it avoids making all sites into evidence for a later civilizational story.

These three archives have their own way of contributing to the memory of Zhang Zhung. The imperial archive provides chronological and political memory: it is telling of Zhang Zhung's role in Tibetan expansion. The Bon archive provides genealogical and civilizational memory: it makes the west a site of religious identity, antiquity, and textual authority. The material archive provides spatial and historical depth. It is a sign of the existence of complex western communities, ritual practices, subsistence systems, and exchange networks and stops its complexity being labelled one thing. It is productive when the overlap doesn't become a mixing of their functions.

The disagreement among modern scholars simply reflects these variations in the evidentiary tasks and not one that could be settled by selection of an authority. Dotson employs materials from Dunhuang to provide narrative and political context to early Tibetan state formation; Blezer is cautious about the later sacred and civilizational constructions and is limited by the textual layers of the language material; Martin is cautious about ethnic attribution from archaeological forms; and Aldenderfer resists ethnic attributions in general [1, 3, 11, 4]. After these positions have been named, disagreement becomes methodologically useful. It illustrates the differences in what each archive allows and does not allow.

None of the archives should rule the other. That is, no religious tradition could replace the archaeological dating, and no archaeological complexity could prove all the later Bon's histories. On the other hand, it is impossible to reduce the meanings that later communities ascribed to Zhang Zhung to the evidence of archaeology for settlement. The task is to compare without collapsing. The individual archives must be understood in their own chronological order, their own medium, and in terms of their own use; and then only, to the extent that correspondences are used, to make the case for continuity.

The three archives tell of various historical predicaments of people with the same inherited name, and cultural memory is what connects the three. The imperial archive recalls political incorporation, the Bon archive reanimates the name as a civilizational ancestor, and the material archive grounds the discussion in a landscape that was indeed inhabited, economically diverse, and ritually dynamic. Unstability is no fault that scholarship should correct in Zhang Zhung. It is what is happening that needs an explanation. The name has survived because it can shift from the political to the religious, the linguistic to the spatial and not be used up by one of these fields.

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4.4. Why Zhang Zhung became a durable civilizational memory

In this view, one can understand why Zhang Zhung became so much a civilizational memory of such a powerful entity as the Tibetan Empire while so many other polities were being swallowed up by it. The first factor was geographical. Western Tibet was far enough from the Yarlung center to maintain a sense of region, and near enough to still be a part of Tibetan political and religious history. It also linked the plateau to Ladakh and the western Himalayas, thus providing the plateau with a truly transregional nature [13]. Geography thus provided spatial distinctiveness: Zhang Zhung was culturally "other" but also historically not "other," from Tibet.

Sacred landscape was a second factor. Later memory received a solid physical, ritual base from Mount Kailash and its related pilgrimage geographies. A forgotten polity, perhaps only linked to a remote administrative site, may eventually become a purely antiquarian attraction, but a place associated to a significant sacred landscape could experience a revitalization in the form of pilgrimage, processional movement, visual identification and narration. The role of sacred geography was to provide mnemonic durability: in other words, what was missing politically could be remedied with ritual presence.

But defeat in politics was a third. It was Conquest who made a separation where subsequent narratives could frame loss and survival. The collapse of Zhang Zhung was integration and successful expansion for the imperial center. In the later Bon, the same split might be thought of as an eclipse of an older cultural and religious cosmos. Defeat provided narrative framework: a before and after narrative where persecution, secret teachings, recovery and continuity could have historical significance.

Linguistic difference was a fourth factor. The fact that the Zhang Zhung language was distinct enabled later communities to think in terms of a civilization as not an earlier form of central Tibetan society. It is also possible that Zhang Zhung possessed its own intellectual world, since it would have been necessary to translate knowledge from Zhang Zhung into Tibetan [11]. The contribution of language was cultural alterity (difference in language): claims of independent ancestry and textual authority were more plausible because of the difference in language, although the precise ancient linguistic situation was difficult to reconstruct.

A fifth factor was competition over religious authority in post-imperial Tibet. A western civilization imagined as old, sacred, linguistically different, and historically prior to complete Yarlung domination might provide a strong confirmation of legitimating genealogy for Bon communities. This isn't to say that the Bon writers intentionally developed a strategic mythology. Cultural memory builds up in a step-by-step manner, involving repetition, selection, harmonization, and reinterpretation. Institutional motivation was provided by religious competition, which served to maintain inherited Zhang Zhung materials and to expand, organize and repeatedly re-actualize them.

The changeover from kingdom to civilization was a gradual process and not due to one invention or one source. A political name survived, a rupture by memory of conquest, and ritual inheritances provided depth, while the sense of linguistic difference allowed for the possibility of an independent intellectual past, sacred places localized memory, and the ruins lent the past material presence. Every factor had a distinct mnemonic issue, whether it was the location of Zhang Zhung, the reasons for its loss, what knowledge it contained, who was responsible for the transmission of that knowledge, or how the past could be found again. It is this accumulation that accounts for the extraordinary persistence of Zhang Zhung as a civilizational memory.

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4.5. Methodological implications: source stratification and asymmetrical confidence

This argument is a means to read the Bon tradition in a non-literal, non-dismissive fashion. Literalism assumes later Bon histories are like contemporary 7th century chronicles, and has the danger of imposing later geography, institutional religion, and script traditions back on them. Dismissal makes the opposite mistake in that the lateness of some claims is used to demonstrate that there is no historically meaningful inheritance in the tradition. Both ways smooth out the evidence, both ways take as a given the question of whether a late story is a straightforward record of an earlier century.

A better approach starts with source stratification. Annalistic and narrative material must be dated in the early texts and analyzed for their political content/intent; in later Bon texts, religious and historiographical purposes may also be considered; linguistic claims require philological comparison; and archaeological claims require independent dating, provenience, and material context. Continuity should only be argued with correspondences that exist between each of the archives after each archive has been comprehended in its own terms. This approach maintains the various degrees of confidence rather than imposing them on one scale of certainty.

The method changes the historian's frame of reference and what he is able to say responsibly. One can argue that Bon texts transformed a historically attested western polity into a civilizational homeland [3, 2] but it would be inappropriate to claim that later Bon texts provide evidence for a huge pre-Buddhist empire that was exactly as the later Bon narratives describe. That is not to say that Zhang Zhung is fictional, because the texts are a bit later. It indicates that the Zhang Zhung that was remembered was a creation of the older names, places, ritual elements, linguistic traces, political memories, etc., which were re-arranged to fit in with later religious requirements. This formulation is inheritance and transformation preserving.

Archaeology can make a contribution but not be made to fit in a text box. Tang and colleagues explicitly prove the high altitude agricultural strategies and differences between small and big sites, but their evidence does not mark every farmer as a subject of Zhang Zhung [14]. Aldenderfer shows variation in mortuary practice, but does not specify one ethnic label for each burial form [16]. Bellezza is a record of a rich material landscape, which nonetheless must be critically compared with texts. The more people know about the boundaries of each archive, the more powerful it is.

A similar approach should be used to handle religious continuity. Van Schaik demonstrates that bon po itself was part of an older ritual world, which had a more complex but real relationship to later Bon; Blezer maps out the emerging of gShen-related identities; and Karmay addresses the evolution of later Bon institutions and doctrines, while seriously considering their claims to older traditions [5, 3, 2]. All these studies taken together turn continuity into a historical issue to be illustrated and not repeated.

This is also of importance from an ethical point of view. To consider a story of a sacred history as a historical artifact is not to mock nor dismiss it. A tradition may continue to be the source of religious authority for followers, even as historians observe phases of its textual, institutional and narrative evolution. A separation of theological authority and historical verification makes it possible for a critical analysis to go hand in hand with respect for a living tradition. It also guards against the "scepticism" becoming another kind of "simplification."

Precision is further important because of the politics of cultural memory. Antiquity can serve as an argument for religious legitimacy, regional heritage and cultural independence. The idea of Zhang Zhung as ancient, united and self-contained can thus be particularly compelling. But the overall text and archaeological evidence suggest plurality – changing political delineations, various

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communities, varying ritual practices, linguistic variation, and repeated reinterpretation. Responsible historical writing should not remove those complexities and provide a modern desire for one civilization to be able to say it is one because it is an easier story to tell.

Too much skepticism gives rise to the other distortion. Many ethnic religious texts are later in date, but this does not negate the fact that there is a rich cultural legacy to western Tibet, and that there may be continuity in place-names, ritual practices, social memory and linguistic material. Archaeology shows that the region was settled, was used for agriculture, had a complex mortuary system and had far-reaching connections with ancient civilizations, and early Tibetan documents mention the political name Zhang Zhung [14, 15, 1]. Later cultural memory consequently emerged out of a historically impregnated context, even if the final narratives are not directly taken from the seventh century.

The most responsible position is one of asymmetrical confidence. The evidence supports high confidence that a polity called Zhang Zhung existed and was incorporated into the Tibetan imperial order in the seventh century [1]. It is also safe to say that there were complex societies in western Tibet prior to the incorporation and that Zhang Zhung played the role of a central figure in the Bon identity later on [14, 2]. Where the evidence is late, circular, or hard to date, for example if these are very accurate maps of a huge ancient empire, if certain scripts have been used consistently since remote antiquity, or the identification of one ruin as the royal capital, confidence will be low.

The hierarchy of confidence is part of the contribution of this paper. It makes uncertainty historically inevitable, even welcome, and it makes for strong claims when the evidence is strong. The loss of internal Zhang Zhung political archives has led to different kinds of voids that have been filled by subsequent religious groups with sacred histories and by modern scholars with philology, archaeology, and comparative interpretation. Absence did not mean that memory was reduced and simple as that. It helped lay the groundwork for the repeated reconstruction of Zhang Zhung.

5. Conclusion

This paper has asked how a conquered kingdom could become a sacred geography, linguistic ancestor, and civilizational memory, and why later Bon communities repeatedly turned to Zhang Zhung for authority.

Political defeat by no means meant the end of Zhang Zhung: the conquered kingdom was sanctified as sacred geography, linguistic ancestor and civilizational memory. It lived on in early Tibetan historiography, western landscapes were still there, older ritual worlds provided inherited resources, linguistic and script traditions provided models of intellectual autonomy, and post-imperial Bon communities had a strong interest in arranging these traces into a genealogy of religious authority. This change was not just survival or a later invention. It was a gradual process of successive reallocations of various forms of relics.

In the following years, the Bon community returned to Zhang Zhung, as it provided an unusually strong combination of historical attestation, spatial distinctiveness, sacred landscape, linguistic difference, and remembered political rupture. They enabled Zhang Zhung to accomplish several of these tasks simultaneously: to narrate antiquity, to localize sacred origins, to distinguish Bon knowledge from other textual genealogies, and to narrate loss without accepting disappearance. The same is true as to the large civilizational past of Zhang Zhung, which was not always apparent from the relatively limited political object that appears in the early sources. What survived was not a single memory but the name's utility as a grid for arranging various inheritances.

The later recollections do not give a lot of information about the precise boundaries or institutions of seventh-century Zhang Zhung, but rather about the historical communities that mobilized the

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past. A sacred geography makes it necessary to ground origins in visible space, a source language makes it necessary to assert an intellectual genealogy that is independent, a founder narrative makes it necessary to organize ritual inheritances that are dispersed, and a script tradition makes it necessary to materialize antiquity in a legible way. So read, late Bon history is not worthless simply because it does not correspond verbatim with the early sources. It is also a sign of the transformation of the social functions of antiquity.

The methodological contribution of this paper to scholarship is its main contribution. Rather than calling the imperial archive, Bon archive and archaeological archive to a common image, it takes difference as proof of historical change. The imperial archive produces political memory, identity-bearing civilizational memory from the Bon archive, and spatial depth and overconfident identification from the material archive. This source-stratified comparison enables not only to explain what is known of Zhang Zhung, but also why Zhang Zhung had to mean different things at different periods.

This is also an argument that pushes cultural-memory theory in a particular direction. If there is one thing that is essential to being held on to throughout the ages, it is not necessarily the basis of a durable cultural memory, Zhang Zhung argues. It can also be a product of the tensions between different archives: the original political trace, the subsequent religious reworkings, the residual place names and landscapes, the fragmentary language, and the material traces which never fit neatly together. Gaps and disagreements aren't just harmful to memory. In some ways, they create room for reactivation; in other ways, the evidence that remains is sufficient to restrict the claims of subsequent communities and contemporary historians. Memory is shaped by both preservation and absence.

The most responsible reconstruction of Zhang Zhung must not only maintain this two truths together, but also keep a balance between them. The early polity was real enough in history to leave its traces in the political sphere, and the western plateau was sufficiently material to sustain later reflections on the significance of an important past. Simultaneously, the evidence that remains does not warrant all subsequent territorial, linguistic, scriptural or archaeological identification. There is nothing reactionary about historical restraint: it is what makes a comparison among the archives meaningful.

The political independence of Zhang Zhung was to come to an end, but the cultural career was to go on as successive communities, again and again, rearranged the few things that were left behind: a name, a remembered conquest, ritual inheritances, traces of a language, sacred places, texts, ruins. When viewed across all three archives, Zhang Zhung cannot simply be viewed as a postscript to the imperial expansion of Tibet nor as a religious empire that can be taken on faith. It is a case study in the rejuvenation of a vanishing polity by cultural memory and the historical significance of this rejuvenation in itself.

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