

By **PALDEN NYIMA** and **DAQIONG**
in Shigatse, Xizang

Recent discoveries have shed fascinating light on ancient dwellers living along the Mapu Tsho Lake in Kangmar county, Shigatse, the Xizang autonomous region.

The archaeological findings suggest that humans living 4,000 years ago relied on fish resources from lakes to survive and thrive in extremely high-altitude environments. The site rests at an average elevation of 4,400 meters in the northern section of the central Himalayas.

According to the Institute for Cultural Relic Conservation of Xizang Autonomous Region, the Mapu Tsho heritage site has been identified as the earliest Neolithic lakeside area in the heartland of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, with the highest altitude and longest duration.

In 2017, the Mapu Tsho heritage site was discovered by residents during a road construction project.

Kangmar translates to “red house” in the Tibetan language. Historically, Kangmar has been home to numerous Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and plateau lakes, with Mapu Tsho being one of them.

From the map, the lake appears as an inconspicuous small body of water, but through the excavations of archaeologists, the remains of an ancient settlement have been revealed.

Shargan Wangdue, deputy head of the Institute for Cultural Relic Conservation of the Xizang Autonomous Region, said the excavation and multidisciplinary research of the Mapu Tsho site have, for the first time, identified the “origin” of prehistoric culture in the central part of Xizang dating back 4,000 years.

Following the discovery, the second comprehensive scientific expedition to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau took place in 2019, led by the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research under the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

“When the multidisciplinary team was conducting a lake survey, researchers found pottery fragments and animal bones at the site,” said Shargan Wangdue.

He said that based on the topography, landform, and the distribution of the remains, the site can be divided into three areas, mainly spread across the southern, southeastern, and northwestern shore of the lake.

The journey from discovery to

Ancient high life discovered

Scientists fascinated to find fish diet helped early humans thrive in extremely high-altitude environment in Xizang

excavation has been fraught with challenges and triumphs.

After recognizing the significance of the site based on their initial findings, archaeologists worked on the application for a national excavation license, which they received in 2020.

From 2020 to 2024, the Institute for Cultural Relic Conservation of Xizang Autonomous Region conducted field excavations at the site, in collaboration with Lanzhou University, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Peking University, and the Archaeological Research Center of the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

“After conducting scientific analysis, such as radiocarbon dating, the pottery was dated between 3,800 and 4,000 years old,” Shargan Wangdue said.

So far, the archaeological excavation area covers 1,650 square meters, with over 60 tombs unearthed, as well as more than 40 ash pits, pillar holes, hearths, stone structures, and other remains. The site has a distribution area of more than 224,000 sq m. An area of about 1,650 sq m — roughly 1 percent of the total area — has been excavated, the Institute for Cultural Relic Conservation of Xizang Autonomous Region said.

“Our dedicated work over five years culminated in the site being named as one of the country’s top 10 archaeological discoveries in 2024,” Shargan Wangdue said proudly.

This site differs from previously discovered sites like Karub, in eastern Xizang, and Lhasa Chugong, in the middle part of the region. It represents a new archaeological cultural style, tentatively classified as the Mapu Tsho Lake culture, according to the institute.

“As we have continued our work, we’ve found that this site not only offers a new cultural type but also crucial physical evidence for constructing the archaeological cultural sequence of south-central Xizang, including regions like the Lhasa, the Nyangchu, and the Yarlung Zangbo river



Above: Shargan Wangdue, deputy head of the Institute for Cultural Relic Conservation of Xizang Autonomous Region, at the Mapu Tsho heritage site in Kangmar county, Xizang autonomous region.

Top: Two potteries unearthed at the Mapu Tsho Lake site.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

clearly indicates that the Mapu Tsho site was connected with its surroundings through significant trade and cultural exchanges,” Shargan Wangdue said.

He added that the prone (face-down) burial with extended limbs in the site’s Area 1 shows that the origin and the population of the site were closely associated with the eastern part of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, indicating that the population may have originated from the east.

He noted that at this site people also discovered millet and wheat originating from the Yellow River basin in northern China, “although these crops cannot be grown here.”

“We assume that they were brought to this area through long-distance trade.”

This synchronization indicates that the historical development of the plateau was intertwined with the surrounding regions, mirroring the societal and historical progress of China as a whole, he added.

Supported by the Kangmar county government, a comprehensive protection plan for the site was completed with a funding of 500,000 yuan (\$69,600) by the county government in 2022, and the plan was approved and supported by the Cultural Relics Bureau of Shigatse City. Another archaeological park was also planned to better promote public engagement in understanding the new findings.

In April, the Mapu Tsho site was included in China’s top 10 archaeological findings for 2024 through a selection organized by the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

Wang Wei, a veteran archaeologist with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a member of the judging panel, said that the site spans a period divided into four stages, ranging from 5,000 years ago to 2,000 years ago, a crucial time for formation of early civilizations in the Central Plains or the Yangtze

and Yellow River regions.

“Our understanding of Xizang used to be quite fragmented, focusing on specific regions or aspects. However, the four distinct periods over this long time span reveal noticeable changes in burial structures, with clear social differentiation emerging around 3,300 to 3,000 years ago,” Wang said.

He said this sheds light on the evolution of settlements, their layouts, distinctive features, and particularly social stratification in the region.

By studying the site, close connections with present-day Sichuan province (neighboring Xizang) and the upstream Yangtze River are evident, showcasing a history of interaction, exchange, and integration, Wang said, adding that many of the burial structures discovered are entirely new findings, providing a fresh perspective in this evaluation.

“Furthermore, through interdisciplinary approaches involving ancient DNA, archaeology, and analysis of flora and fauna, various methods have been employed to reveal the adaptability, complexity, and continuity of human activities at altitudes above 4,400 meters on the plateau,” Wang said.

He noted that the discovery therefore contributed invaluable insights into understanding the evolution of high-altitude human populations on a global scale.

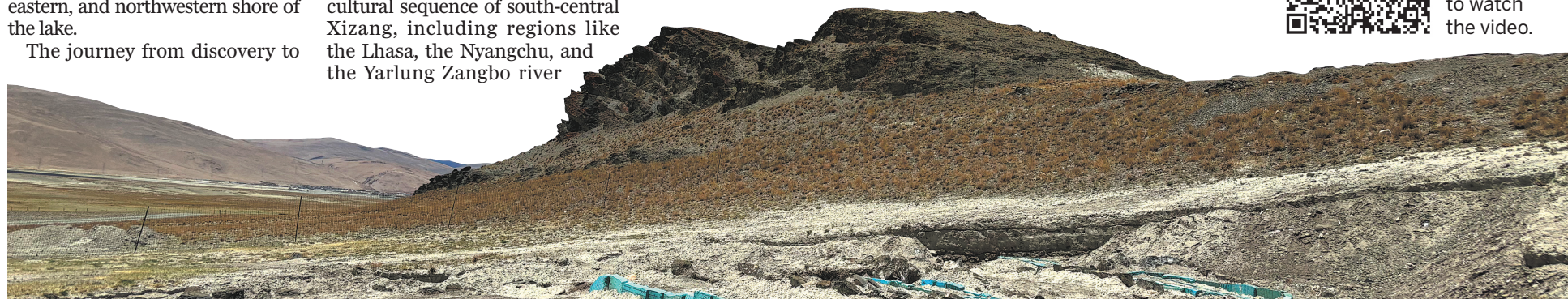
Archaeology in Xizang has seen unprecedented progress over the past decade, largely due to government support, as well as initiatives led by the National Cultural Heritage Administration. A critical development was the release of the 2021-2035 Xizang Archaeological Work Plan.

“This plan outlines the future direction for Tibetan archaeological work, with the Mapu Tsho site highlighted as a key project,” Wang said. “This site provides an invaluable sample for studying the adaptation processes of early humans to extreme environments.”

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A panoramic view of the Mapu Tsho site. It is identified as the earliest Neolithic lakeside area in the heartland of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY