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# Preliminary Study of Rock Art of the Western Himalayas

Laurianne Bruneau

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## PURĀTATTVA

### CONTENTS

Obituaries	vii
Editorial	xi
<b>ARTICLES</b>	
Let not the 19th Century Paradigms Continue to Haunt Us <i>B.B.Lal</i>	1
The Joint Italian-Mongol Geoaerchological Project in the Valley of Lakes Gobi Altayn Region (Bayankhongor aimag, Bogd soumon) <i>B. Marcolongo and B. Gunchinsuren</i>	20
Distinctive Architectural Traditions of Temples at Mari Indus <i>Farzand Masih</i>	39
Excavated Chalcolithic Sites in Gujarat: An Appraisal <i>Rajesh S.V and Ambika Patel</i>	46
Early Village farming Settlements in Eastern India: A New Appraisal <i>R.K. Chattopadhyay, Rajat Sanyal and Kumkum Bandhopadhyay</i>	68
Flogging a Dead Horse <i>Michel Danino</i>	94
A Preliminary Study of Rock Art of the Western Himalayas <i>Laurianne Bruneau</i>	104
Interaction between Western Indian Subcontinent and Iran in the 4 <sup>th</sup> -2 <sup>nd</sup> Millennia BC <i>Ozra Rounaghi and V.S. Shinde</i>	112
Further Excavations at Agiabir (2005-06) <i>Vibha Tripathi and Prabhakar Upadhyay</i>	121
An Archaeological Exploration in Sundarbans, Bangladesh <i>Bijoy Krishna Banik</i>	130
A Decade of Crumbling Heritage: Ayodhya (1995-2005) <i>B.R. Mani</i>	139
Archaeological Research at Sisupalgarh 2007: An Early Historical City in Orissa <i>R.K. Mohanty, M.L. Smith, T. Matney, A. Donkin and G.A. Greene</i>	142
OCP: Its Late Harappan Concept: Reexamined <i>M.D.N Sahi</i>	155
The Early Farming Communities of the Northern India: A Fresh Approach <i>R.S Fonia and Sangita Chakraborty</i>	167

Discovery of Structural Stupa at Bhon, District Buldana, Maharashtra <i>Bhaskar Deotare, Gurudas Shete, Reshmasawant, Vaishali Kathale and Satish Naik</i>	176
New Evidence on the Maritime Activity at Dabhol on the Maharashtra Coast <i>A.S. Gaur, Sundaresh, Sila Tripathi and K.H. Vora</i>	186
Need for a Comprehensive Plan for Conservation of Wall Paintings in India <i>O.P. Agrawal</i>	193
<b>NOTES &amp; NEWS</b>	
A Note on the Enigmatic Triangular Terracotta Cakes <i>J. Manuel</i>	199
Recent Explorations in the Meham Block of District Rohtak (Haryana) <i>Vivek Dangi</i>	205
Harappan Weights <i>M N Vahia and Nisha Yadav</i>	213
A Note on Sothi Pottery <i>Tejas Garge</i>	218
Keshavpur- A Unique OCP Site of Aligarh District <i>Ramjit and Mohd. Abid</i>	226
A Unique Terracotta Bull Unearthed from Andipatti Excavation- Tamil Nadu <i>S. Vasanthi</i>	236
Sample Preparation for Archeometric Studies: Analysis of Medieval Glazed Bricks from West Bengal <i>Somnath Ghosh, Kaushik Gangopadhyay and Varada Khaladkar</i>	239
A Reappraisal of Rare Spoked Wheels from Harappa (Pakistan) and Ganeshwar (India) <i>L.S.Rao</i>	244
A Rare Siva Linga at Budholi, Sahanspur, Dist. Dehradun (Uttarakhand) <i>Madan Singh Chouhan</i>	247
A Study of Painted Motifs on Chalcolithic Malwa Ware <i>Vinay Kumar</i>	251
Antiquity of Benisagar in the Light of New Evidence <i>T.J.Baidya, N.K.Sinha and R.Dehuri</i>	262
A Recently Discovered Copper Hoard from the Ancient South Panchal Region <i>Rakesh Tewari, R.K.Srivastava and N.S.Tyagi</i>	266
Discovery of a New Shell Inscription: A Possible Historical Link of Maitrakas from Vallabhi <i>Shubhra Pramanik</i>	272
An Upper Palaeolithic Site at Ellora, District Aurangabad, Maharashtra <i>S.B.Ota, P.P.Joglekar, A.A.Kshirsagar and R.S.Thakur</i>	274

## BOOK REVIEWS

280

Chakrabarti, Dilip K. 2006 <i>The Oxford Companions to Indian Archaeology; The Archaeological foundations of Ancient India</i> <i>K.N.Dikshit</i>	
Tripathi Alok (Ed.) 2007 <i>India and the Eastern Seas</i> <i>S.S.Biswas</i>	
Sharma, D. P. 2007 <i>Harappan Art</i> <i>Mukta Raut Dey</i>	
Bachchan Kumar. 2007 <i>The Buddhist Art: Vietnamese Perspectives</i> <i>Asha Joshi</i>	
Sharma, D.V 2007 <i>Archaeology of Fatehpur Sikri</i> <i>S.S.Biswas</i>	
Ali, Rahman, Ashok Trivedi and Dharendra Solanki 2004 <i>Chalcolithic Site of Ujjain Region: Mahidpur (Excavation Report)</i> <i>Vinay Kumar</i>	
Ray, Himanshu Prabha 2008 <i>Colonial Archaeology of South Asia — the Legacy of Sir Mortimer Wheeler</i> <i>K.N.Dikshit</i>	
Tripathi, Alok 2007 <i>The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (AMSR Act, 1958)</i> <i>S.S.Biswas</i>	
Choudhary, D., Kiran Kranth and C. Udayalakshmi. 2006 <i>Ramayana in Indian Art and Epigraphy</i> <i>Asha Joshi</i>	
Sharma, R. K. (Ed.) 2007 <i>History, Archaeology and Culture of Narmada Valley</i> <i>Mukta Raut Dey</i>	
Kanungo Alok K. (Ed.) 2006 <i>Excavating Waves and Winds of (Ex) Change: A study of Maritime Trade in Early Bengal</i> <i>S.S.Biswas</i>	
Basu, Durga 2005. <i>N. B. P. Cultures of Eastern India</i> <i>R.P.Sharma</i>	
<b>ANNUAL REPORT</b>	291
Report of the XL Annual Conference of Indian Archaeological Society held at the Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, from 2 <sup>nd</sup> to 5 <sup>th</sup> December 2006.	
<b>OFFICE-BEARERS</b>	294
<b>BOARD OF MANAGEMENT</b>	295
<b>PLATES</b>	

# A Preliminary Study of Rock Art of the Western Himalayas

LAURIANNE BRUNEAU\*

Anyone interested in the Western Himalayas is well aware of the existence of rock carvings in this area. Without a doubt those of the Upper Indus Valley (Northern Areas of Pakistan) are the most well-known as they are the object of a systematic study. For the last 20 years, rock art sites of the Upper Indus Valley have been published by the Pak-German study group 'Felsbilder und Inschriften am Karakorum Highway' of the Academy of Sciences and Humanities of Heidelberg, Germany (ANP and MANP).

However, a hundred rock art 'locations' have now been identified in Ladakh (district of Jammu and Kashmir, India) and Western Tibet: 70 in the former (which includes the adjacent valleys of Zaskar, Nubra and Rupshu) and 30 in the later (Rutog district only). The general term 'location' is used purposely and consciously here: it implies that petroglyphs are known at particular places. At the present state of research, without specific topographic studies, the terms 'site', 'concentration', 'point' or 'complex' are not to be used in reference to the rock carvings of Ladakh and Western

Tibet (Pl. 1) (On these terms see Francfort and Jacobson 2004: 58)

The present paper shall discuss petroglyphs from these three regions: the Upper Indus valley, Ladakh and Rutog district. The decision to deal with rock carvings from these areas all together results, not only from their belonging to one geographical unit (the Western Himalayas), but also because they enable one to identify a 'cultural unit', which is understood here as the sharing of specific artistic formulae and themes.

The paper will focus on animal and human representations that provide information about Protohistory. Protohistory in Central Asia is, the time-span ranging from the Neolithic period to the integration into a 'literate empire'. The study of the petroglyphs is based on comparisons with rock art from other parts of Eurasia which has been extensively studied (mainly Central Asia and south-Siberia) and with representations on other medium (wood carving, for example).

The subjects represented in the rock art, but also the way in which they are represented, reveal cultural ties with Central Asia as early as the Bronze Age. After considering petroglyphs from this period, particular attention will be drawn upon animal representations in the so-called 'animal style of the Steppes' that can be dated from the Iron Age, enabling one to fill the gap between south of the discoveries made on the subject in China and Central Asia. The paper will end on a broader view showing the interest of such a rock art study also for the historic period.

Concerning the Upper Indus valley in Pakistan the issue of its relationship with Central Asia has been dealt with in various articles by the late Karl Jettmar (Jettmar 2002, 1991, 1985, 1982 a, b & c). As for the Bronze Age the most representative example of this relation are the so-called 'mascoids' representations of the Okunevo type (the Okunevo culture developed in the Minusinsk basin-South Siberia- and the Altai) which are cautiously dated from the Early Metal Age (end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium/beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC) (Jettmar 1982b: 300; Francfort 1991: 127). From the Iron Age (1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC) there are not only engravings, but metal objects, on which decoration is characteristically carried out in the so-called 'animal style' (Jettmar 1982a, 1991). The most well-known example of such an object is a bronze plaque in shape of an ibex, on whose horns the head of a bird is attached, acquired by Jettmar in the Kandia valley and first published in the *Afghanistan Journal* (Jettmar 1982a). The piece is dated, by comparison with bronze objects from the Pamirs, from a period between the 5<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Jettmar 1982: 87). Mention should be made also of several bronze objects published by Dani in the third edition of his *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* (Dani 2001, plates and pages 53-63). Those are finds from the Northern Areas of Pakistan collected between 1998 and 2000 (Dani 2001: *addenda*). Among them is an 'arrow head', said to come from Gas near Chilas. Its handle displays an 'S' topped by an ibex

with folded legs and two circular cells marking the body, similar in attitude to the one from Kandia (Dani 2001, pl.: 58/4)

Concerning Ladakh and Western Tibet, a preliminary area of study of protohistoric rock art has been published by Francfort and his colleagues some 15 years ago (Originally Francfort *et al.* 1990, for the English version of the paper see Francfort *et al.* 1992). Through selective engravings they convincingly demonstrated that Ladakh, Zaskar and Western Tibet could be, as well, 'fully related or at least connected' to the cultures of the steppic Bronze and Iron Age (Francfort 1992:173).

As it will be seen, this argument can be reinforced by the study of animal and human petroglyphic representations that have come to light in the recent years. Some engravings were so far unpublished; while others have been recently published by Bellezza, Germano and Linrothe.

## Engraved Animal and Anthropomorphic Representations from the Bronze Age

Firstly, animal representations and, in particular, engravings representing yaks are to be considered. Yaks are easily identified by the rendering of the horns but what is even more typical on some figures is the rounded-shaped tail. This rounded tail is well-known on petroglyphs representing aurochs in Central Asia, South Siberia and Mongolia. For instance, one can consider panels from Ust'-Tuba (Minusinsk basin, south Siberia) and Tsaagan Salaa (Mongolian Altai.) (Pl. 2) The rounded-shaped tail is considered in those regions as a stylistic feature of the Bronze Age. Thus, it is possible to date such representations from Ladakh and Western Tibet from this period as well. (Pl. 3)

Also dateable from the Bronze Age are representations in the 'bi-triangular' style. Identified in

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the Upper Indus valley (Jettmar 1982b: 298, 1982c:19), such animal engravings, are also present in Ladakh and Western Tibet (Pl. 4 and 5). Widespread in the rock art of Central Asia these figures are easily recognisable by their narrow waist. Soviet scholars and particularly Sher when analysing the petroglyphs of Sajmaly-Tash (Kazakhstan), have stressed the affinity of such engravings to representations of animals on painted pottery of the Bronze Age in the Near East (Jettmar 1983:298).

In Ladakh and Western Tibet the 'bi-triangular' style is mostly applied to ibex engravings. It seem banal to say so but the ibex is the most frequently represented animal in the rock art of Ladakh and Western Tibet as it is the case in central Asian petroglyphs. This may be easily explained by the fact that the ibex is the most common animal in these mountainous areas, but that would be leaving aside the importance of the ibex in the imaginary of local people. In fact, as Dollfus' study (1988) has shown, in present day Ladakh and Zanskar, the ibex is a symbol of good omen and fertility. For instance, ibex figurines are offered for births and weddings. The fact that this role of the ibex is not found in other parts of the Tibetan plateau whereas it is present westward not only among the oral traditions and rituals of the Kailash of the Hindukush but also among other mountainous peoples in the Pamirs, the Iranian plateau and Caucasus (Dollfus 1988:135-136), clearly indicates that the Western fringes of the Tibetan plateau have been in contact with Central Asia. How and when these contacts came into existence is still an open question. As Tucci wrote contacts between Western Tibet and Iranian cultures are doubtlessly very ancient, and artistic motifs could well have been handed on from Iran to Tibet through migrations and exchanges (Tucci 1973:16). Nevertheless, discussing the nature of these migrations and exchanges is beyond the scope of this paper.

Turning now to human representations, one notice

that they are, more often than not depicted in action: fighting, hunting or dancing for instance.

Among the petroglyphs of Ladakh and Western Tibet scenes of fighting and, in particular, archers fighting a duel are frequent. The depiction of these duels is highly distinctive due to the way in which the path of the arrows has been engraved (Pl. 6). These fighting scenes, bearing this particular 'arrow's path', are found all over Central Asia in rock art. Among many others, one can take for example a panel from Tsaagan Salaa (Mongolia) that clearly shows this type of duel (Pl. 7). There, as at other sites in Central Asia, this particular duel scene is dated from the Bronze Age. Such a dating might, in turn, be assumed for similar petroglyphs from Ladakh.

On the engraving from Mongolia the particular headdress of the left archer also has to be looked at. This type of headdress has been identified by some authors as 'horned masks'. Whereas in the Mongolian panel the figure wearing this headdress is a fighter or warrior, in the petroglyphs of the Indus Valley, for instance, some figures wearing it are clearly hunters (Hauptmann 1997: 49 n°3). At the present day, such headdresses are worn by hunters in the Upper Indus Valley and Mongolia (Pl. 8).

Other figures wearing these particular headdresses are represented dancing in the engravings. These headdresses have been identified as: radiating or feathered, according to the Indo-Aryan or shamanistic systems of interpretation (Francfort 1998; Francfort/Hamayon 2001). In Central Asia, such anthropomorphic figures are known since the Chalcolithic (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC) with the culture of Afanasevo and Okunevo. From this period, the grave slabs of Karakol in the Altaï are certainly the most famous examples of anthropomorphic figures wearing radiating or feathered headdresses (Francfort 1991:129). One should draw particular attention to one of the figures painted on a Karakol slab, wearing a twofold radiating or feathered headdress,

whose 'hands' are actually represented by three 'feathers' (Francfort 1994: 46, fig.15) (Pl. 9) Such 'hands' are also found on two engraved dancing figures from Western Tibet, who are also represented with a radiating or feathered headdress (Pl. 10). One finds radiating or feathered masks also in Zanskar (Ladakh) (Pl. 11). In Central Asia, in rock art, during the Bronze Age (that is, Andronovo cultures 2000-1500 BC) such headdresses are becoming more common, as it can be seen from the engraved figures of Samjali-Tash (Martynov et al 1992:30). Consequently, a date between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC may be proposed for figures wearing radiating or feathered headdresses in the petroglyphs of the Western Himalayas.

So far, Western Himalayan petroglyphs are concerned, that can be dated from the Bronze Age (end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium/ 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC), based on semantic and stylistic comparisons with rock art from other parts of Eurasia, have been looked at. The engraved representations detailed above (yaks' representations with rounded-shaped tail, ibex in the 'bi-triangular' style, archers fighting a duel and anthropomorphic figures wearing a radiating or feathered headdress) supplemented to the type of representations analysed previously by Francfort (hunter with a rounded-shaped end mace at the waist, 'mascoids' and specific horse engravings) (respectively Francfort *et al* 1992: 149, 150, 151) enable one to assert that during the Bronze Age the Western Himalayas shared some stylistic traits and themes, at least in rock art, with Central Asia.

As for the transition period, late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium/early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium (that is called Karasuk in the steppes), it is best characterized by the representation of the deer with its head reversed over its back. Parallels to such type of engravings from Ladakh have been established with Chinese jade plaques dated from the Western Zhou period (end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century/ 10<sup>th</sup> century BC) (Lu Liancheng/Hu Zhisheng 1988). As it has been

previously studied in details (Francfort and al 1992: 151) one should now, applying the same comparative method, consider petroglyphs from the Iron Age.

### Animal Representations from the Iron Age

Quite a number of engravings with an undeniable steppic look have come to light recently in the Western Himalayas, and mainly in Rutog district. However, only the most significant petroglyphs will be dealt with and particular attention will be given to the development of the 'S motif'.

The most striking representations are those of deer with folded legs (Pl. 12 and 13). Such representations are well-known in the animal style of the steppes in rock art but also on other medium, especially in bronze or gold plaques (For such plaques: Gryaznov 1969: ill. 56, 57 and 58; Bunker 2002: catalogue 135, 136, 142, 143 and 145). As Tchlenova's study shows, the image of the stag with folded legs appeared all over Central Asia during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, but it is not homogeneous and it varies locally (Tchlenova 1963). Exact parallels to the engraved stags of Rutog are not found in other regions. Their distinctiveness is the frontal representation of the antlers. It is generally agreed that the frontal depiction of the antlers is characteristic of the oldest deer rock carvings of central Asia and that during the Iron Age the antlers are shown in profile (Francfort *et al* 1992: 183 note 52). Consequently, one wonders if the representation of the antlers as seen from the front combined with folded legs in an image should be considered as a trait of archaism or else as an iconography specific to Western Tibet. Until further finds, it is impossible to decide.

Another well-known stylistic feature of the so-called steppe art is the emphasis of the shoulder blade and the hip on animal representations. Both, or one only, are ornamented with a spiral. Animal representations with spiral ornaments are known since the beginning of the

1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC and are best characterized by the Arzhan stele (Francfort et al 1990: 15 and fig.15). At the so-called 'mature period' (Saragsh-Pazyryk) of the animal style (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) this ornamentation becomes more common (Sher and Francfort 1995: VI). It is worth noting that petroglyphs of animals with such spirals enhancing the shoulder blade or the hip are rare in Western Himalayan rock art. The engraved representation of a gazelle from Lurulangka, on tiptoe and its head turn backwards, is the best example of this early phase of development of the spiral ornament (Pl. 14).

On the other hand, representations of animals whose body is ornamented by the late development of the spiral ornament, the so-called 'S ornament', are numerous in Western Tibetan rock art. The 'S ornament' is also very well-known in the Altaï and the Tuva. It is agreed that the 'S ornament' on animal's representations comes from the joining up of the shoulder blade and hip spirals, but it is not easy to date with accuracy. In fact, the 'S ornament' is not a dating element itself: it is its combination with other stylistic features that enables one to suggest a date for the representations. One can take for instance the engraving of a deer, with antlers spread apart and standing on tips of the hoofs at Renmudong (Pl. 15).

The animal represented standing on tips of the hoofs, and in particular the deer, is a well-known pose in the animal style of the steppes: it seems to date from a period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Francfort et al 1992: 152). Consequently, it is appropriate to date this type of engravings in Western Tibet from the second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. It seems then that the 'S ornament' can be dated from the same period. On the engraving from Renmudong, the 'S ornament' has retained its significance and origin, as it still emphasize the shoulder blade and the hip. However, there are many animal representations in Western Himalayan rock art on which the 'S ornament' is applied at random. The 'S ornament'

is not only applied to any animal representation (yak, wild boar, dog or wolf, etc.) but also on any part of their body (Pl.16 and 17). A date of the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC is plausible for this type of representation, but it could also be considerably later.

At the same time, the 'S ornament' underwent another specific change: it became an independent motif. There are isolated 'S' engraved at Char, in Zanskar, for example. (Pl. 18) The so-called 'independent S motif' is known in Central Asia, not only in rock art, but also on other medium. One can take for example a wooden bushel from Djoumboulak-Koum (Xinjiang), which is a fortified settlement dated from the mid-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC), engraved with such an 'S motif' (Francfort 2001: fig.16). It is likely that the engraved S of Western Himalayan rock art dates from the same period. It is noteworthy that, even the media are different; Xinjiang and the Western Himalayas shared at some point the same artistic motifs.

Once again, during the Iron Age, a comparative semantic and stylistic study with engraved representations, but also on other mediums, from other parts of Central Asia enables one to connect the Western Himalayas to the steppic world. Only a few particular 'animal style' representations (engravings of deers with folded legs, emphasis of the shoulder and the hip by a spiral, body ornamented by a 'S' and independent 'S motif') have been discussed above. (For a discussion of other petroglyphs dateable from the Iron Age from Ladakh and Western Tibet see Francfort et al 1990: 15-20). During the Iron Age, a common artistic entity spread from the steppes to the Western Himalayas in rock art and it is probable that it did so also in other material. Stray finds, like the metal piece in the shape of a bird of prey with its head reversed over its back published by Koenig, could help clarify the question (Koenig 1984). The piece, acquired in Leh, has been rightfully compared to objects excavated in Central Asia and dated from a period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century

BC (Koenig 1984: 320; Francfort 1992: 186 note 137).

Finally, though the Western Himalayan petroglyphs have an undeniable 'steppic look', it is very difficult to find exact parallels. Whether this may be explained by the fact that the Western Himalayas is an additional 'province' of the animal style with its own separate line of development or by cultural diffusion through successive transmigration or immigration (Jettmar 1991:3), the present state of research does not allow to decide.

Rock art is very often overlooked by excavation archaeologists but in a region where such archaeology is not yet carried out, the capacity of petroglyphs to bring forward information about the past should not be underestimated.

It should be noted that only one excavation has taken place in the Northern Areas of Pakistan in 1938 (at the site of Naupura where the famous 'Gilgit manuscripts' have been uncovered) as well as in Ladakh (A.H. Francke investigated a large flagstone grave in Leh in 1903 and 1909) (Francke 1994: 68-74, vol. 1) while there has not been even one in Western Tibet; although one should mention here the recent archaeological surveys conducted in Upper Tibet by Bellezza (Bellezza 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005).

Although the absence of excavation archaeology is deplorable it should not be considered as a drawback. As it has been demonstrated in other regions, petroglyphs have their own archaeological legitimacy. One can take for example Jacobson's study of the Bronze Age of South Siberia (Jacobson 2002). Through a detailed analysis of specific engraved panels, she proved that the vision of life seen through rock art 'is much richer than can be found in any mortuary context (Jacobson 2002: 44). In other words, petroglyphs do have the ability to reveal information that cannot be retrieved from any other type of archaeology.

The comparative approach undertaken in this paper has helped to reinforce the argument that the Western Himalayas are to be connected to the cultures of the Central Asian steppes during Protohistory. The similarity of the images and style indicates that a common artistic community spread from the steppes to the Western Himalayas, at least in rock art. Through the petroglyphs one sees the persistence of semantic and stylistic peculiarities which characterize the art of the steppic cultures. It is interesting to notice thematic similarities between the rock art of Central Asia and that of the Western Himalayas, but what is even more significant are the missing themes. Certainly, during the Bronze Age the quasi-absence of chariots' representations is the most striking. Whereas such engravings are rare in the Upper Indus Valley (in fact only two engravings are known: one at Thor-North and one at Dadam Das) (Jettmar and Thewalt 1985: 13; *MANP* 5: 46), they are (at the present state of research) inexistent in Ladakh and Western Tibet. It is a task for the future to explain why the subject matter of the petroglyphs informs one of cultural choices? Was it consciously done or not. From a stylistic point of view too, in spite of shared artistic formulae like the rendering of tails by a rounded-shape or the enhancing of hips by a spiral, there are some omissions (once again, for the time being), for example animal representations with angular humps or with twisted hindquarters. They will also have to be accounted for.

Briefly, mention should be made of a large number of petroglyphs, relevant for the study of the historic period and in particular of Buddhism, that have been consciously left aside. Jettmar stated some 17 years ago that 'certainly a typological study of the Buddhist monuments is overdue' (Jettmar 1989: 180). Such a typological and chronological study of the stupa engravings of the Upper Indus valley has been recently carried out and has brought fruitful results concerning the diffusion of Buddhism in the region (Bruneau 2003). Without a doubt a similar study will be successful in



better understanding the history of Ladakh and Western Tibet. Through petroglyphs one notices that sometime at the turn of the first millennium AD the Western Himalayan regions shifted from the central Asian cultural sphere of influence to the Indian one and later on (late 7th/ mid-9<sup>th</sup> century AD) to the Tibetan one, as

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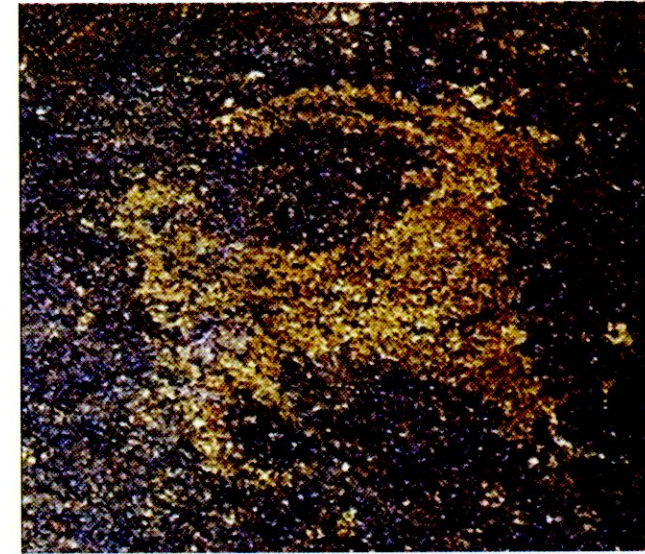
**Bruneau, Pl.1:** Map of rock art locations in the Western Himalayas, from west to east: the Upper Indus Valley (Pakistan), Ladakh (India) and Rutog district (western Tibet/China). (Map produced by the US Central Intelligence Agency: Kashmir region 2003)



**Bruneau, Pl.2:** Engraved aurochs at Ust'-Tuba II, Minusinsk, South Siberia. Bronze Age. (after [www.epistemes.net/petro/index.php](http://www.epistemes.net/petro/index.php))



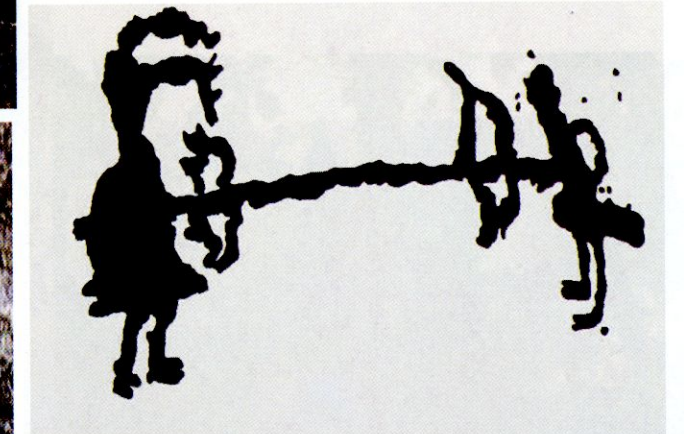
**Bruneau, Pl.3:** engraved yaks at Nabulong, Rutog district, Western Tibet. Bronze Age. (after Li Yongxian and Huo Wei, 1994: catalogue no 56)



**Bruneau, Pl.4:** ibex in the bi-triangular style, Taru, Ladakh. Bronze Age. (Photograph by HP Francfort)



**Bruneau, Pl.5:** ibex in the bi-triangular style, Char, Ladakh. Bronze Age. (after Linrothe 1999: n°10)



**Bruneau, Pl.6:** duel scene, Leh road (towards Alchi and Khalsi), Ladakh. Bronze Age. (after Tucci's 1935 expedition, in Orfino 1990: fig.24)



**Bruneau, Pl.7:** duel scene, Mongolian Altai: Tsaagan Salaa I, Bronze Age. (after [www.epistemes.net/petro/index.php](http://www.epistemes.net/petro/index.php))



**Bruneau, Pl.9:** Painted grave slab from Karakol, Altai (3rd millennium/ beginning of the 2nd millennium BC). (Photograph by VD Kubarev, in Francfort 1994: fig.15)



**Bruneau, Pl.8:** present-day hunter wearing a 'horned mask', Upper Indus Valley, Pakistan. (Photograph by the author)

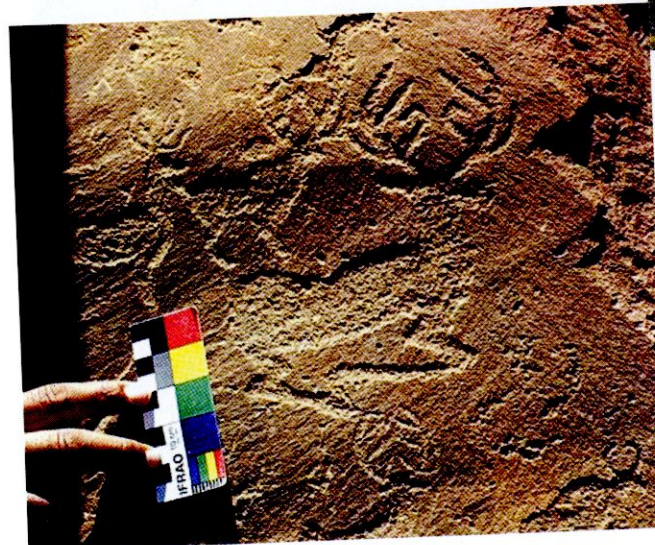


**Bruneau, Pl.10:** Two dancing figures with 'feathered' hands and headresses. Exact location unknown, Western Tibet. (after Bellezza, 1999: fig.10)



**Bruneau, Pl.11:** 'feathered' or 'radiating' mask, Tungri, Zanskar (Ladakh). Photograph by I Riaboff

**Bruneau, Pl.12:** Deers with folded-legs, exact location unknown, Western Tibet. Iron Age, 1st millennium BC. (after Bellezza, 2000)



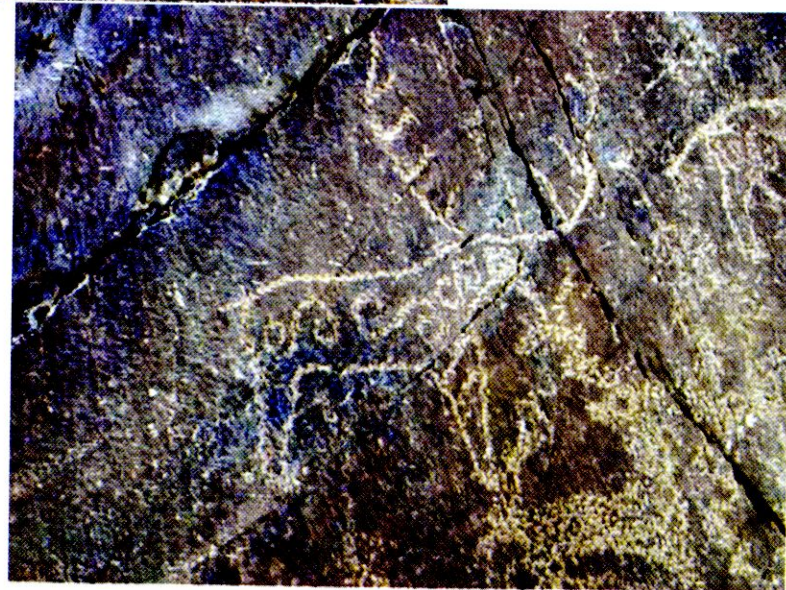
**Bruneau, Pl.13:** Deer with folded-legs, exact location unknown, Western Tibet. Iron Age, 1st millennium BC. (after Bellezza, 2000)



**Bruneau, Pl.14:** Engraved gazelle at Lurulangka, Rutog district, Western Tibet. Iron Age, first half of the 1st millennium BC (after Li Yongxian and Huo Wei 1994: catalogue no 9)



**Bruneau, Pl.15:** Engraved deer standing on the tips of the hoofs with a 'S ornament' on its body, Rutog district, (Renmudong?), Western Tibet. Iron Age, 8th-5th century BC. (after Germano 200- file B4559)



**Bruneau, Pl.16:** Engraved deer with several 'S ornament' applied at random, Rutog district, (Renmudong?), Western Tibet. Second half of the 1st millennium BC (after Germano 200- file B4526)



**Bruneau, Pl.17:** Engraved representation of a dog with a 'S' marking its body, Rwa 'brog 'phrang, Rutog district, Western Tibet. Second half of the 1st millennium BC (after Bellezza, 2001: fig.10.69)



**Bruneau, Pl.18:** Engraved 'independent S motif', Char, Zanskar. Mid-1st millennium BC (Photograph by D Klodzinski)