

The rock art site of Zamthang (Zanskar), when money and good will turn into disaster

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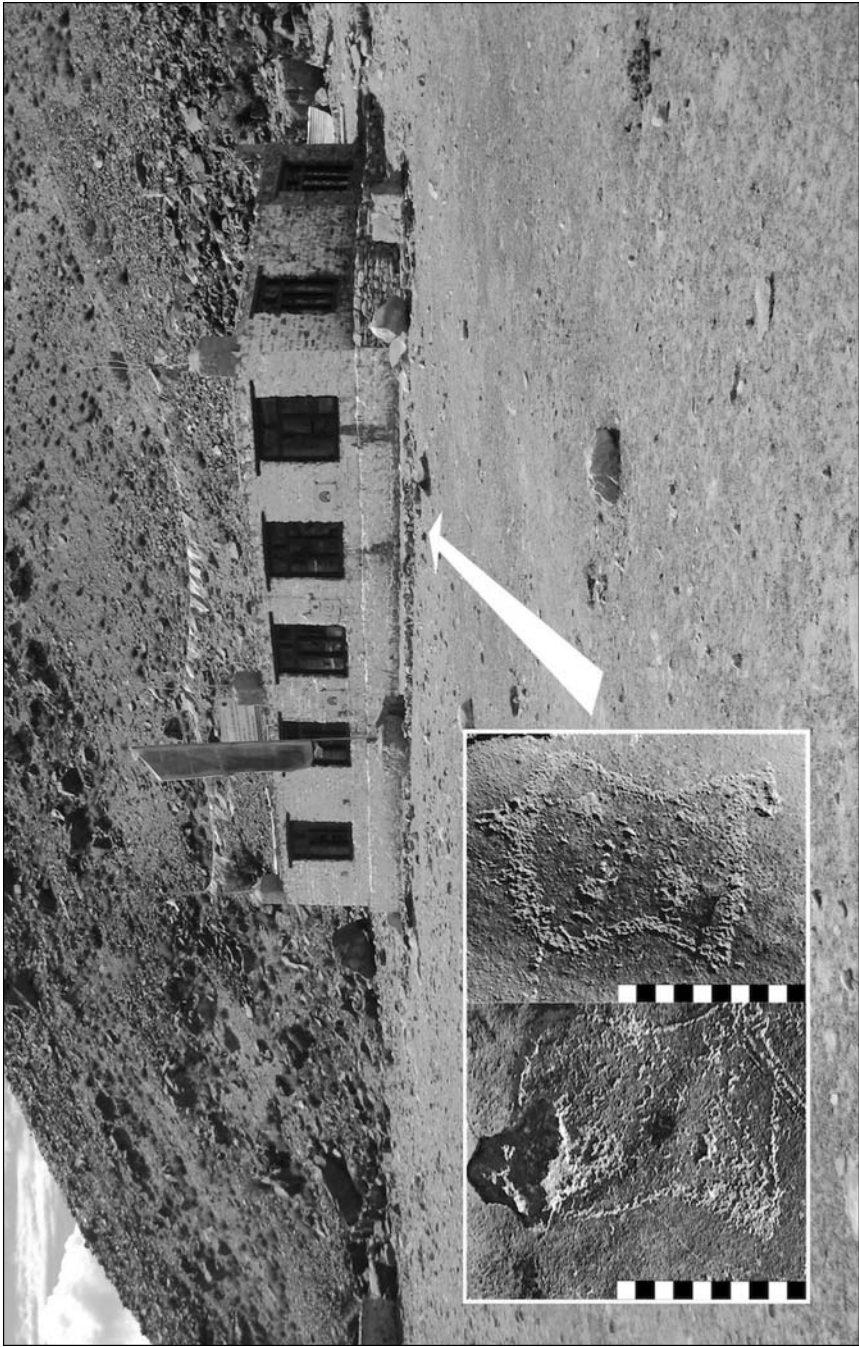
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The rock art site in Zamthang in 2011 and engravings (inset) in 2007. Photo by Martin Vernier

The Rock-art site of Zamthang: When Money and Good will turn into Disaster

—Martin Vernier and Laurianne Bruneau

The rock art site of Zamthang is located in Zangskar (Kargil district, Ladakh, J&K), in the Lungnag valley, three days walk south of Padum, the capital of this ancient Himalayan kingdom.

The rock carvings are situated on a terrace overlooking the river, opposite Char village that can be reached thanks to a bridge down below the site. The site is mainly composed of a dark reddish slab standing out and blocking the landscape, it bears numerous hunting and chasing scenes as well as animals, humans and signs.

The site was first published in 1982 under the name “Char”.¹ In 1990 it was again referred to in a paper dedicated to the Protohistoric carvings of Ladakh/Zangskar². In fact, some hunting scenes, animals and representations of masks are similar to engraved images found in Central Asia and dated from the Bronze and Iron Ages (2500-300 BC). The same year a Tibetan inscription from the site was published. This peculiar inscription is one of the most ancient testimonies to the presence of Tibetan army officers originating from Khotan (Xinjiang, China) in Ladakh in the 8th-9th centuries AD³. In 2010 the present authors published carvings from Zamthang in an article dedicated to Iron Age petroglyphs of Ladakh.⁴ The historical importance of Zamthang site is therefore well acknowledged by rock art experts.

One of the authors, Martin Vernier, carried out a systematic documentation of the site in 1999. A numbering of the carvings were done and a photograph of each one taken: 825 images were documented out of which 285 located on the main slab. There are 38 different motifs on the site (yak, ibex, bird, hunter, etc). A second photographic record was carried out by Vernier in 2004 and copies on transparent plastic sheet of the most significant images were made. With its total of 825 engravings, the rock art site of Zamthang is the largest of Zangskar and counts among the top ten sites in Ladakh. Over the years Mr. Norbu, the head of the one and only family leaving near the site, encountered the various rock art experts passing by. He thus became well aware of the historical importance of the carvings and tries to act for their protection. His fear to see the site damaged by the road under construction in the valley was calmed down by the decision of the authorities to have it built on the opposite bank.

¹ Klodzinski, D. and Y. Gouazé. 1982. Des gravures rupestres en Himalaya (Zanskar, province du Ladakh). *Bulletin de la Société des études littéraires, scientifiques et artistiques du Lot (Cahors)* 103, 2:129-134.

² Francfort, H.-P.; D., Klodzinski and G., Mascle. 1990. Pétroglyphes archaïques du Ladakh et du Zanskar. *Arts Asiatiques (Paris)* 45:5-27. An English version of this paper was published in 1992. Archaic Petroglyphs of Ladakh and Zanskar. In *Rock Art in the Old World: papers presented in Symposium A of the AURA Congress, Darwin (Australia), 1988*, Lorblanchet, M. (Ed): 147-192. INGCA, New Delhi.

³ Denwood, P. and N.F., Howard. 1990. Inscriptions at Balukhar and Char Zampa and Archaeological Observations on the Fort of Balukhar and its Environs. In *Indo-Tibetan Studies: papers in honour and appreciation of Professor David L. Snellgrove's contribution to Indo-Tibetan studies*, Skorupski, T. (Ed) : 81-88. Institute of Buddhist Studies, Buddhica Britannica, Tring.

⁴ Bruneau, L. and M., Vernier. 2010 Animal style of the steppes in Ladakh: a presentation of newly discovered petroglyphs. In *Pictures in Transformation: Rock art Researches between Central Asia and the Subcontinent*, Olivieri, M.L.; L. Bruneau and M., Ferrandi (Ed): 27-36. BAR International Series 2167 ArchaeoPress, Oxford.

Unfortunately the site was partly destroyed by a project of the local community, supported by western NGOs. When Martin Vernier passed again through the site in Summer 2011 he saw for himself the destruction caused (See photo on page 24). A large building to be used as learning centre was built on the site by the «Himalayan astro-medicines and ecological development society» thanks to the financial help of two French associations (Lions international, Val de Roselle and Santé Zanskar Himalaya am-ci).

Apart from the fact that any construction on such a historical site should be banned, the use of the stones bearing carvings as building material is outrageous. Ironically invaluable protohistoric and historic records vanished into the walls of a building dedicated to the preservation and transmission of traditional culture! Mr Norbu, appointed protector of the rock art site by the hazard of history, tried his best to raise the awareness of this building project and the importance of the rock art site, but local community forces and capital inflow trumped his will to preserve the carvings.

The fate of the site of Zamthang raises two issues. First we see the ignorance of the local population of the historical importance of rock sites. Zamthang is not an isolated case; the destruction of carvings has happened across Ladakh without much consciousness of the loss of this irreplaceable patrimony. In this regard, Mr Norbu pointed out the lack of material and information at his disposal that could have helped the protection of the Zamthang site. Secondly, the role played by western NGOs into local affairs should be questioned. There are, for the time being, no regulations in Ladakh in the field of cultural heritage. Anyone bringing cash can come and operate as they wish with little local support on historical sites. In Zangskar in 2009, a Buddhist monument made of stone and mud bricks which had mural paintings dated to the 13th-14th centuries was reconstructed in cement and the murals thereby defaced by an Italian association (Stupa Onlus).⁵

The leaflets dedicated to the rock art of Ladakh recently written by the present authors and supported by INTACH and also the proposal for a 'Heritage Authority' to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council signed by major actors acting for the protection of cultural heritage will hopefully avoid to encounter in the future another Zamthang.

⁵ The authors recently published a note concerning this issue: Vernier, M. and L., Bruneau. 2011. Archaeological heritage at stake, *Ladakh Studies (Journal of the International Association for Ladakh Studies)* 27 (May 2011): 13-14.