

■ *Exploration et documentation des pétroglyphes du Ladakh 1996-2006.*
By Martin Vernier (Como: Fondation Carlo Leone et Mariena Montandon,
2007. Preface by Henri-Paul Francfort. 81pp., illus., maps)
– John Bray

This beautifully produced book provides a succinct overview of the current state of research concerning Ladakhi rock art—the numerous rock inscriptions and engravings

scattered across the entire region. These petroglyphs constitute one of the most important aspects of Ladakh's heritage. The book expresses a sense of wonder and delight at their diversity, historical interest and artistic merit; while at the same time sounding an urgent note of warning. All too many ancient petroglyphs have already been destroyed in the course of Ladakh's modernisation process, and the fate of many others hangs in the balance.

The author is an independent scholar based in Switzerland, who since 1996 has set himself the task of undertaking a comprehensive survey of petroglyphs in Central Ladakh, the Markha valley and Zangskar. With the help of questionnaires, bibliographic research and—most importantly of all—on-the-ground investigations, he has recorded a provisional list of well over a hundred sites and thousands of images. His objective is to establish a database which—if the worse comes to the worst—will serve as a record of what has been destroyed and, on a more hopeful note, will provide a resource for future scholarly research.

The book begins with a brief overview of Ladakh's geography and history, and a summary of rock art research dating back to Alexander Cunningham in the late 19th century and A.H. Francke in the early 20th century. It then explains the author's approach to his task. With the help of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, he is able to record the precise location of every site. In addition to taking detailed photographs, he has also made tracings of the most important figures. The book is beautifully illustrated with what inevitably is no more than a small selection of these photographs and tracings.

One of the most interesting chapters offers a preliminary classification of images: animals, particularly ibexes; people; bodily 'attributes' such as hand and footprints, symbols; objects such as axes and daggers; and scenes—notably including hunting scenes. In a brief inter-regional summary, the author draws comparisons with similar petroglyphs dating back to the Bronze Age in the 3rd to the 2nd millennia BC in Central Asia, Mongolia and Tibet. He also includes a valuable bibliography.

Many of the most important sites are situated along trade routes, including river banks close to former or present-day bridges. These routes are as important now as they were centuries ago, and this continuity in itself poses one of the greatest threats to the survival of many of the most important petroglyphs. The author offers a brief but telling account of how he tried in vain to open a dialogue with the leader of a camp of workers whose task was to smash up rocks for road-building purposes. Other rocks have been defaced with trivial contemporary graffiti.

If Ladakh's rock art legacy is to survive more-or-less intact, it is essential to raise awareness of its value not only among scholars but also among a much wider constituency of local people and officials. Martin Vernier's survey work and this excellent book are important steps in this direction. It is to be hoped that they will be followed by further studies in a variety of languages, both in Ladakh itself and in the wider national and international arenas.