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REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE

ENDANGERED PETROGLYPHS OF LADAKH

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One of the largest continuous networks of pre historic rock carvings in India, if not the world, is slowly disappearing. The 60 kms stretch along the Indus river is dotted with petroglyph sites dating back to the Bronze and Iron ages. Rivalling the well known rock art site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, these rock carving shed light on ancient cultural linkages between India and Central Asia predating the famed Silk Route. Petroglyphs, (an image created by removing part of a rock surface by incising, pecking, carving or scratching) etched over 5000 years ago by some of the earliest inhabitants of Ladakh provide a rare glimpse of Ladakh's prehistoric past depicting images of animals, humans and symbols. It is from these boulders, located along the banks of the Indus and other rivers, that we learn of early cultural routes that linked Ladakh with Central Asia.

These links with Central Asia are confirmed with historic rock inscriptions carved in

Chinese, Sogdian and even Tocharian dated from the end of the 1st millennium AD. In addition we find rare inscriptions written in ancient Indian scripts of Kharoshti, Brahmi and Sarada that shed rare light on the history of Ladakh through the first millennium AD. The earliest Tibetan inscriptions of Ladakh were written down in the late 8th century or early 9th century at the apogee of the Tibetan Empire by army officers.

While there is evidence of early destruction of rock inscriptions, what is of worry in recent years is the rapid pace at which these carvings are disappearing. The destruction has not been intentional but rather arises primarily from a lack of awareness on the significance of these sites followed by the lack of adequate legislation that can ensure their protection. As roads are widened, new roads laid and construction reaching its peak, the boulders are being blasted – sometimes to make way for roads but more often to generate material for construction. In the



Ancient Kharosthi inscription documented by Francke at Khatse that no longer exists

span of a single generation, Ladakh is losing several hundred generations worth of history that will never be recovered.

The earliest known destruction of a historic inscription is perhaps the famous Kharosthi inscription first documented by the Moravian missionary A.H Francke in 1909. This inscription mentioned the name of the Kushan ruler Wima Kadphises II and threw light on Ladakh's links with the Kushan empire. The boulders were threatened with destruction even then. Francke records *"We arrived in Khatse just in time to prevent the boulders containing the oldest inscriptions of Ladakh from being broken. There are several rocks near Khatse bridge bearing ancient Kharosthi inscriptions, and one with an ancient Brahmi inscription. A new bridge was under construction, many boulders, some with interesting rock carvings and inscriptions had been blasted; and the boulder with the Brahmi inscription had already been marked for blasting."*

Fortunately, Francke documented some of these inscriptions for today there is no trace of them - they have vanished possibly destroyed at the time of the construction of the bridge.

In more recent years, there has been an alarming increase in the number of known carvings that have been destroyed. The most recent destruction, was documented by Martin Vernier, an archaeologist, who first visited the Lungnak valley of Zanskar in 1999 documenting one of the largest precincts of petroglyphs in Ladakh - 825 found at a single location in the village of Zamthang. The site is dominated by a large, dark reddish slab which bears 285 hunting and chasing scenes as well as animals, humans and

representations of masks similar to engraved images found in Central Asia. These can be dated from the Bronze and Iron Ages (2500-300 BC). A Tibetan inscription from the site was documented in 1990. 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 AD. Vernier returned to Yamthang, in summer 2011 to discover that the large slab had been destroyed to make way for a learning centre – to make matters worse, the carved boulders had been used as building material for the school.

The case of Zamthang highlights the urgent need to generate awareness among village communities living near petroglyph sites as well as funding institutions on the immense significance of these sites. By linking the safeguarding of these heritage sites to the contemporary life of village communities it may be possible to preserve petroglyphs for the future. Heritage education for school children need to promote



Petroglyph precinct in Zamthang, (Zanskar) over which a school has been constructed (Inset) Mascoids from the precinct used as construction material for the plinth of the school building. Signage for the school overwritten over a petroglyph boulder. © Martin Vernier

WHAT ARE WE DOING TO PRESERVE PETROGLYPHS?

The Convenor, Shri Tsering Angchok (Hornak) and Executive Committee member, Shri Thupstan Norboo met with Shri Rigzen Spalbar, CEC, LAHDC and discussed the plight of rock carvings and petroglyphs across Ladakh. CEC expressed his concern over the destruction of petroglyphs. INTACH will now work closely with the LAHDC and communities residing near petroglyph clusters to develop petroglyph precincts. This will be promoted through heritage walks to generate awareness on this facet of Ladakh's most ancient heritage.

INTACH in collaboration with TEDAHL and RASOL has also prepared a pamphlet for the BRO to be disseminated to its dispatches across the region. With the aid of diagrams, the pamphlet enables easy identification of petroglyphs.

better understanding of Ladakh's ancient past. Creation of petroglyph precincts promoted through heritage walks and tours can help generate incomes for village bodies and make the preservation of such heritage sites economically viable. But more critically there needs to be adequate legislation and regulations that ensures the protection of these historic remains. It is only through a combined strategy of adequate legislation and awareness building that the future of this 5000 year old heritage can be ensured.

Ladakhi scholar, Tashi Dawa who has been documenting petroglyphs for the past 15 years, laments the rapid destruction of many sites that he has documented. Most recently, a small precinct of boulders before the bridge to Stakna were destroyed as a private road was laid to the left of the bridge. Boulders surviving on the right of the bridge, are testament to the unique carvings found in this particular site. The destruction of the Zamthang and Stakna sites follow earlier known destruction of petroglyph sites in Alchi, Khaltse, Taru and Yaru Zampa (en route to Chilling).

Road laying and widening are crucial in Ladakh for both strategic reasons as well as for linking remote hamlets with the district and block headquarters. However, today with the mapping of petroglyph clusters it is possible to identify major clusters and develop strategies for protecting these



Stone contractors breaking stone near Domkhar. The rapid upsurge in construction has created a huge demand for stone.
© Martin Vemier

boulders. Heritage regulations to protect Ladakh's cultural and natural heritage can guide development projects in the region to ensure that there is minimum damage to this heritage. In extreme cases where it is not possible to avoid going through a petroglyph cluster, provisions can be made to move the boulders to specially created petroglyph precincts. Quarrying of stone for construction also needs to be regulated to ensure that stone crushers are not permitted to work in identified petroglyph precincts. Discussions held by INTACH with the BRO in June, 2011 have led to the creation of a small pamphlet for the BRO which will be issued to all their dispatches involved in road construction. A recent discussion with the LAHDC has elicited support for the creation of petroglyph precincts. (see box on pg 2) These steps are a small beginning in what must necessarily be a larger, long term programme for the preservation of petroglyphs.

Petroglyph site at Yaru Zampa (between Sumda Dho and Chiling). The road to Zanskar being laid in the area has damaged a large number of petroglyphs, directly through blasting and indirectly as blasted stone hurled against petroglyph boulders crushing them©
Martin Vemier

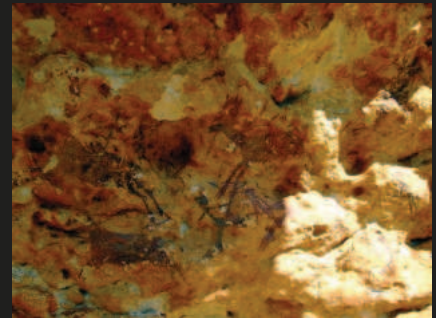


FAMOUS UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE ROCK ART SITES AROUND THE WORLD

Rock art sites are gaining increasing recognition around the world and a large number of sites have been recognized as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO



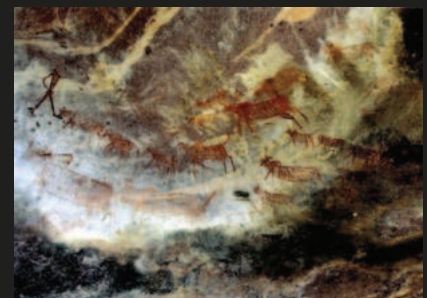
The famous rock art caves of Lascaux, FRANCE



Rock art of the Mediterranean Basin on the Iberian Peninsula, SPAIN



Petroglyphs from the Tamgaly Gorge, Kazakhstan.



Rock Art of Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh, India)

Images from www.whcunesco.org