

WHAT IS ROCK ART / What is rock art

Rock art is a valuable, varied and abundant archaeological material that has been proved a reliable object of study in many parts of the world. The existence of petroglyphs in Ladakh, is known since 1902 thanks to the drawings and writings of the famous missionary August Hermann Francke.

The term 'petroglyph' refers to an image created by removing part of a surface by incising, pecking, carving, or abrading. Scholars often use terms such as "carving", "engraving", or other descriptions of the technique to refer to such images. In Ladakh, due to the geology of the region, rock carvings are very rarely found in caves, as the granitic nature of the mountain is not favorable to the formation of caverns. They are rather found in open air galleries located along the banks of the Indus and its tributaries. In the last decade about 14,000 petroglyphs located at 91 sites have been documented. Over 40 other sites have been surveyed.

The images represent mainly animals, humans, and symbols. The engravings date back from Prehistory down to the present times. Some of them shed light on the cultural links between Ladakh and Central Asia, especially during the Bronze and Iron Ages (2500-300 BC). A comparative analysis of these representations shows that Ladakh shared thematic and stylistic traits with the Central Asian steppes. A number of petroglyphs from Ladakh are similar to those documented in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Pakistan).

At the Bronze Age, images such as yaks, ibexes very often hunted by a bowman, also depicted in battle and duel scenes are represented respecting the same stylistic features than those of the petroglyphs found in Central Asia. For the Iron Age, carvings in the "animal style of the steppes" (stags and felines mostly) correspond to images on rock, wood or textiles excavated in Central Asia. The dispersion of the rock art sites enables us to perceive the penetration of Central Asian tribes into the Indian subcontinent. It seems that the Nubra valley has been an important route between Ladakh and Xinjiang (China) from the Bronze Age on.

The links with Central Asia are confirmed until the end of the 1st millennium AD with historic rock inscriptions carved in Chinese, Sogdian and even Tokharian. 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 originating from Xinjiang.

In summary researches on the rock art of Ladakh allow for the first time to propose a secure cultural sequence of the region from Protohistory to the Medieval Period. They are the main documentation on Ladakhi history prior to the 14th century (date of the first written royal chronicles). They also demonstrate that mountains have never been a barrier, and that Ladakh is culturally linked to Central Asia since the Bronze Age and to Tibet since the Tibetan Empire.



General view of a rock art site along the Indus, Karu 2010



A boulder engraved with several figures, Murgu 2077



Detail of a yak, Murgu 2007



Close up on a composition, Murgu 2007