

PRESERVING ROCK ART /
Preserving rock art

Thousands of petroglyphs and more than a hundred rock art sites are documented. Many more are expected to be discovered as only one third of Ladakh's territory is explored so far. Since the 1980's petroglyphs are disappearing at a faster rate than during the last five thousands years.

The recent economic development of the region leads to the construction of innumerable new roads in the valleys, along with bridges and dams. These are often built in the surroundings of rock art sites: virgin rocks or those bearing images are equally smashed to be used as building material! In the last years, numerous sites have been destroyed totally or in part. Vandalism (graffiti or paintings drawn over existing petroglyphs) and new construction habits using stones rather than mud-bricks are further threats. Development is expending fast. In some cases there is no choice other than carrying out rescue archaeology but whenever possible rock art sites need to be preserved. Rock art is a common heritage and everyone is concerned by its preservation: competent authorities, villagers and tourists.

There are three ways of preserving the rock art of Ladakh: protection, conservation and reproduction. The term protection refers to in situ rock art. Ideally petroglyphs should be preserved in their original setting. But when the destruction of a site is inevitable – by flooding or road construction – the most important images should be moved, after a careful recording of their original position, to a dedicated location – a museum for example – where they can be stored and eventually displayed. This is what we call conservation. If the rock images cannot be protected in situ or moved to a safe place because of their size or inaccessible location, the only answer is to reproduce them, using photography, plastic sheet reproduction or laser scanning.

Due to its quantity and quality, rock art is nowadays the most important archaeological material that enables us to form an idea of Ladakh's past. The preservation of the precious and irreplaceable heritage is the responsibility of all.

How to preserve petroglyphs?

Do not walk or touch the rocks that bear images, do not scratch or paint them, do not move or cut them.
When using stones for construction, do not break down boulders with images: Ladakh has plenty of uncarved stones.
If a rock art site is endangered (dam, road or house construction, vandalism, etc.), please inform the Museum.



Quarrying for construction, Alchi 2007



Broken down, Khaltse 2009



Graffiti and vandalism, Inamdo Thang 2007



Cut and removed for private trophy, Khaltse 2009