LADAKHI ROCK ART VISUAL CHRONOLOGY / ladakhi rock art visual chronology

During Prehistory, no engraving can be positively identified. In the rest of Central Asia, depictions of hands and feet are considered to be from this period, though these motifs could also have been depicted later as well. For the other kind of motifs (animals, humans, etc.), so far we have not been able to distinguish any stylistic feature that would allow us to differentiate representations from this period from those of later periods, but it does not mean that figures other than hands and feet were not represented during the Prehistory.

Animals from the Bronze Age are typically depicted with a body that is rectangular or bi-triangular. Tails ending with a ball are also characteristic of this period.
It is in the Bronze Age that we find the most representations of humans, either on their own or in hunting or fighting scenes, sometimes in duels. In such scenes, the paths of the arrows are depicted all along from the bow to the target. Beside this, the weapon that we find only during this period is the mace. Humans typically have triangular or bi-triangular bodies. Some have a head that is mushroom-shaped, which we don't find before or after this period. And only then we find giants, that is to say engravings of humans that are larger than human size. The last anthropomorphic figure specific of that time are mask-like representations, called "mascoids". Their significance; i.e. what they actually represent, is still obscure. In the symbols, circles and glasses are also specific of that time.

During the Iron Age, a new particular style flourishes, called the Animal Style or Art of the Steppes. In this art, zoomorphic representations are by far favored. Originating in the steppes of Central Asia this art is characterized by zoomorphic representations represented in a style recognizable at first glance with rounded bodies ornamented with scrolls and standing like on the tip of the hoofs. Humans are totally ignored: so far only one possible representation of this art has been found in all of Ladakh. Animals are also often decorated with an "S", that can also be found by itself, either as a simple S or as a more elaborate ornament.
Beside this Animal Style, other scenes were depicted in simpler ways that make them impossible to distinguish from scenes carved in other periods. Only a few could be identified as being from the Iron Age, as for example fighters using war hammers, a weapon archaeologically associated with this period in the rest of Central Asia.
Proportionally, representations of the Art of the Steppes are really not numerous: they count for only 1% of all engravings.

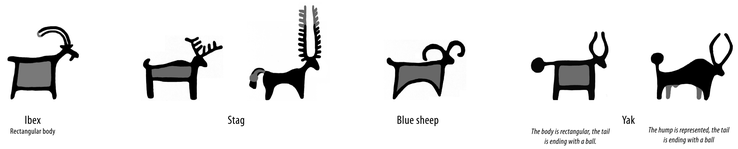
The beginnings of Historical Times are not well defined in Ladakh. They seem to coincide with the introduction of Buddhism in the area, of which the dating is still under discussion. For anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations no new style emerged, making it impossible to identify engravings of humans and animals from this period.
As such, the only figures that can be positively dated from the Historical Times are the symbols and monuments derived from Buddhism, the chortens being the most common and the most representative of them.
A few hunting scenes can also be dated from this period, when cavaliers use rifles. But other than that, no stylistic feature distinguishes these scenes from others made in the Bronze Age or in the Iron Age.

PREHISTORY / prehistory

SYMBOLS / symbols

BRONZE AGE / bronze age

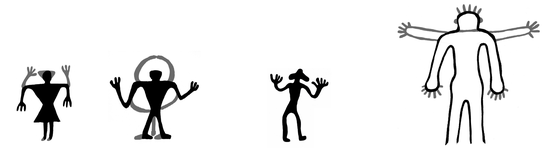
ANIMALS / animals



SCENES / scenes

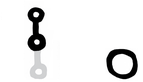
In fighting and hunting scenes the paths of the arrows are depicted

HUMANS / humans

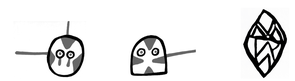


WEAPONS / Weapons

SYMBOLS / Symbols



MASCOIDS / Mascoids



IRON AGE / iron age

ANIMALS / animals

ORNAMENTS / ornaments

SCENES / scenes

Feline chasing a deer

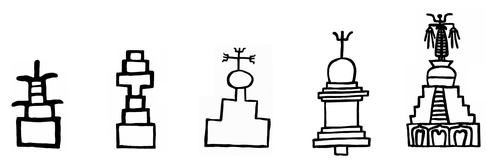
WEAPONS / Weapons

war hammer

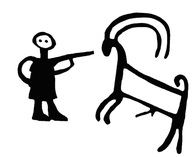
HISTORICAL TIMES / historical

BUDDHIST SYMBOLS / buddhist symbols

CHORTENS / chortens



SCENES / scenes



The hunter uses a rifle.

Parts in grey indicate the possible variations within a same figure.

Drawings are made after reproductions made on site on transparent plastic sheets. The four scenes presented for the Bronze Age are copies of such reproductions, where every impact is delineated. All illustrations made by Martin Vernier. Text and layout by Laurianne Bruneau, Quentin Devers and Martin Vernier.

ལ་དྭགས་མི་ཟླ་ཏོར་མི་རིས་བཤད་སྒྲུང་།

སྟོན་མ་སྟོན་མའི་དུས་མི་བཏོས་པ་ཞིག་ཏུ་ཧང་ཅོ་མ་ལས་ཀྱང་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་མ་ཡིན། ཨེ་ཡི་ཡའི་ཀུང་ནས་ཡང་ཁ་ནས་ལ་ནང་ལས་ལ་ཀུན་ཏུ་ཐུག་པ་ཡིན་ལགས། ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ཆགས་ལ་ཅང་ཡལ་ལའི་ཀུན་ཏུ་ཐུག་པ་ཡིན་ལགས། ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ཆགས་ཕྱི་ཁ་ཅི་ཡོད་ལགས། དེ་ལས་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ཆགས་ཕྱི་ཁ་ཅི་ཡོད་ལགས། ཏུ་ལགས་ཏང་མ་ཡིན་ལ། ཕ་ཏ་ལ་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ལ་ལམ་ལ་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ཡོད་ལ་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ལ་ལ་ཁ་ཕྱི་ཐུག་ལ་ཆགས