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Notes on Three Series of Unusual Symbols Discovered on the Byang thang

by JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA

In the course of conducting field surveys in conjunction with a cultural and historical study of gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho, located on the Tibetan Byang thang ⁽¹⁾, two types of previously unstudied symbolic compositions were discovered. The elucidation of the chronology, and function of these markings poses formidable problems because, they cannot with any degree of certainty be slotted into any known Tibetan literary or cultural tradition. At gNam mtsho, in two widely separate caves, two different sets of markings were discovered painted in red ochre pigments of iron oxide. Both of these compositions are closely associated with pre-Buddhist cave paintings made with the same red ochre paint. At Dang ra g.yu mtsho symbolic designs similar in style to one of the sets of painted figures at gNam mtsho, were found engraved on a boulder.

The study of rock art on the Tibetan plateau is a new endeavour unlike in neighboring Beloristan where petroglyphs have been the object of intensive study for nearly twenty years ⁽²⁾. While the evidence so far points to Tibetan rock art lacking the technical sophistication of varieties found in Indus Kohistan, it nonetheless, is tremendously diverse in terms of chronology and content. The symbolic compositions discovered at gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho reflects this diversity and at the same time illustrates how little we know about rock art in Tibet.

Some of the most archaic cave paintings known in Tibet are located in a small cave on the western shore of gNam mtsho, in an escarpment called lCe do, situated four kilometers north of Do skya dgon pa. This cave which boasts a dense aggregation of paintings spanning millennia, is only 2 m deep and 1.4 m tall at its entrance. The paintings of lCe do were first pictorially documented in the book, *Art of Tibetan Rock Paintings* ⁽³⁾. A closer examination

⁽¹⁾ The cultural history of gNam tsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho, two of the most important lakes on the Byang thang, from the prehistoric period onwards, will be studied in detail by the present author in a book entitled *Divine Dyads. The Ancient Civilization of Tibet*, to be published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamshala.

⁽²⁾ For an enquiry into the cultural and historical significance of some of the petroglyphs and cave paintings found on the Tibetan plateau cf. Chayet 1994: 63-71; Francfort, Klodzinski & Mascale 1992: 147-92; Orofino 1990: 173-201.

⁽³⁾ *Art of Tibetan Rock Paintings* based on archaeological investigations was compiled by the Administrative Committee of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region headed by Suolang Wangdui (bSod nams dbang dus). This pioneer work provides an overview of rock art in Tibet and pictorially documents a cross section of the nearly 60 sites discovered on the Tibetan plateau since 1985.

conducted by the author revealed three figures which uncannily resemble pre-Han dynastic ideograms, but which in actuality do not belong to the Chinese literary tradition nor apparently, with any other known paleographic tradition (Fig. 1). These three figures by virtue of their integration with the other compositions at lCe do, can be attributed to the Tibetan cultural milieu and particularly to the inhabitants of the Byang thang.

The three figures are comprised of a number of sweeping linear strokes and are closely allied with drawings of hunters and animals spatially and in the quality of pigment used. Though these compositions in some cases predate the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, the age of the figures under review is questionable. If they also date to a period before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, they might well be a product of the Zhang zhung kingdom which formed a separate polity and culture on the Byang thang until its annexation by King Srong btsan sgam po in the 7th century (cf. Norbu 1995: 32-33; Karmay 1975: 180-81). The function and purpose of the three figures is problematic due to the absence of cultural precedents to assess them by. Most prosaically, rather than being invested with symbolic meaning, they may merely represent a literal portrayal of some aspect of Byang thang cultural life, however, thus far, they have not been identified with any known implement, article, organism or natural feature of the pastoral or hunting culture of the 'brog pa.

By their very appearance, the three figures at lCe do seem to be abstract designs or compositions and not facsimiles of natural objects or cultural impedimenta. It is worth reviewing other possibilities regarding the identity of the figures. It is quite plausible that they are a kind magical notation, signature or imprint of vital cultural activities such as clan or tribal identification, hunting or ritual expressions. The preponderance of hunting motifs in the cave paintings at lCe do suggests that the figures under review do indeed have a connection with hunting and hunting culture. A third hypothesis in reference to their function, pertains to the possibility that they represent a primitive Tibetan system of writing based on lexigraphs, possibly a cultural counterpart to the pre-classical Chinese system of writing. Nevertheless, it is much more likely that they are more primitive preliterate abstractions delineating phenomena, processes or objects. Whatever the case, these characters must have had limited currency and probably an exclusive ritual function. It does seem strange that such an important cultural innovation as a lexigraphy or symbology should be so poorly represented in the archaeological record of Tibet, even if its primary medium was a perishable material such as paper or leather.

At this juncture in the investigation, we are left with three curious symbols whose significance is highly elusive. It is difficult to see how a firm informational base can ever be established when dealing with such a rare and enigmatic cultural manifestation. Given the evidence, these figures represent a highly isolated and limited cultural expression whose importance to the development of civilization on the Byang thang is marginal at best. It can only be hoped that more archaeological evidence related to these compositions will be discovered in Tibet, broadening the basis for investigation.

Also at gNam mtsho but at far more accessible bKra shis do, a sacred headland, on the southeast corner of the lake, another enigmatic series of figures were discovered ⁽⁴⁾. The

⁽⁴⁾ These are not documented in *Art of Tibetan Rock Painting* despite several full pages of published photographs devoted to paintings found in some of the other caves of bKra shis do. Their obscure location may explain why they were overlooked.

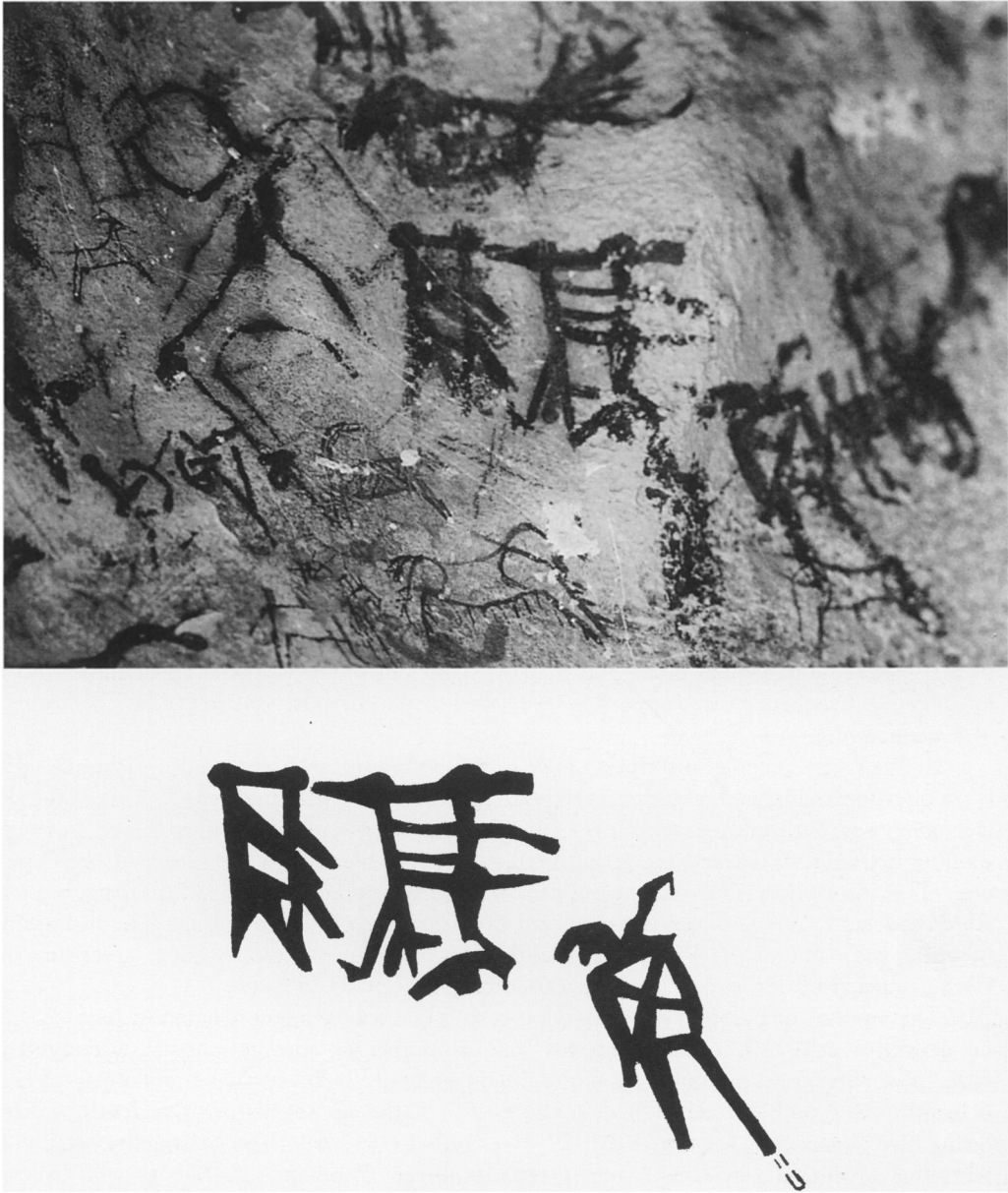


Fig. 1.

figures under consideration are located on the south side of the bKra shis do chen formation in one of the five ancillary chambers of the kLu khang, a cave complex. These figures appear to be symbolic in function, probably representing an ancient system of cipher or notation, however, as with the lCe do composition they have not been conclusively identified.

Like the lCe do figures, they are painted in red ochre, but this is where all similarity between them ends. There are three sequences of figures in the tiny cave adjacent to the much larger main kLu khang cave. The most coherent sequence consists of ten symbols placed in three haphazard rows (Fig. 2). The largest figure of the sequence is located on the far right and occupies the middle and lower rows. It is very much fashioned like a roughly drawn Tibetan *dbu can* letter 'A'. If this figure stood alone no further enquiry into its identity would be necessary as it would seem quite self-explanatory. This, however, is not the case because to the left of it are a group of highly unusual symbols. The upper row consists of three figures somewhat resembling the Tibetan *dbu med* letter 'A' but modified beyond recognized calligraphic conventions. In the middle and lower rows are six more figures which bear no resemblance to the 30 letters of the Tibetan alphabet, with the exception of the fourth character from the left in the middle row, which looks a little like the *dbu can* letter *nga*. Directly above this sequence of ten figures, is another sequence of two letters resembling the figures in the upper row of the first sequence only much larger in size. There is also a third sequence which contains the largest number of figures but which unfortunately are badly faded and generally illegible. The figures in the third sequence are organized within a rectangle and also painted in red ochre. The uppermost row consists of figures resembling the markings in the upper row of sequence one and the two figures of sequence two. The symbols in the lower rows of sequence three appear to be related to the compositions in the lower two rows of sequence one.

In this same cave is an inscription in *dbu can* that reads *Kun la bzang yen*. Although there is no question that this inscription is referring to the Primordial Buddha, Kun tu bzang po, it is composed with unusual wording. The meaning of *yen* is unclear; it might be a corrupt spelling of *mkhyen*, derived from the noun *mkhyen pa* meaning a very learned or revered one. This inscription is not an integral part of the other paintings in the kLu khang, but was added at a later date as shown by its adventitious position on the cave wall. The inscription by citing the name of the Primordial Buddha was probably written by those practising the rDzogs chen tradition either in conjunction with Bon or Buddhism.

The pressing question of course is what is the significance of these compositions? While no definitive answer is available at this time a number of observations are warranted in order to set the tone for further enquiry. It is generally believed that the Tibetan system of writing was probably developed in the 630's, in the decade before the death of King Srong btsan sgam po (cf. Stein 1972: 59; Beckwith 1984: 220). The personality attributed with this invention was King Srong bstan's minister, Thon mi sam bho ta who utilized Sarada, a medieval Indic script as technical inspiration. There is however, a contesting school of thought championed by the Bon po, that believes that rather than inventing Tibetan writing, Thon mi sam bho ta improved upon an existing system of writing in order to facilitate the translation of Buddhist texts (cf. Norbu 1989: 8). Bon historical records speak of a literary tradition used in Zhang zhung based on a script called *sMar yig*, which has survived in a special form of calligraphy called *sMar tsugs* or *Lha bab yi ge* (Norbu 1989: 8-9). Another script which according to the Bon po originated in pre-Buddhist Zhang zhung, is similar to



Fig. 2.

the ornamental and ritual Lan tsha script, as typified by the inscription on the priceless King Lig mi rgya seal ⁽⁵⁾.

⁽⁵⁾ This seal made of iron covered in a thin layer of silver is enshrined at the Tibetan Bon po Monastic Centre in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India. It was kindly made available for the author to look at by the abbot, rGyal ba sMan ri mkhan po, who is the head of the Bon religion. According to sMan ri mkhan po, the seal which reads 'Kha tsan pa shang li shi ra' tsa' (King Lig mi rgya, Conqueror of the World) is one of the best examples of pre-Buddhist system of writing in extant.

An examination of the three series of figures, however, reveals little or no affinity with the scripts believed to have been prevalent in the Zhang zhung period ⁽⁶⁾. Moreover, a system of writing would be expected to be more refined in execution and appearance. The crudely composed characters belie a prevailing illiteracy. Finally, the specimens are extraordinarily scant in reference to the number of characters they contain. For these reasons, it is very unlikely that the kLu khang figures represent a fragment of a pre-Buddhist script. If the figures are not part of an ancient literary tradition why then do they exhibit a precursory character in relation to the Tibetan alphabet? Could they not just be the scrawling of a preliterate person or group aping proper writing in an attempt to capture the power and status of the Tibetan literary tradition? This explanation is fraught with discrepancies, however, because it is incongruous that a group of people living only seven days walk from the capitol would not have had at least indirect access to writing, books and other literary instruments. The only resolution lies in the existence of a certain cultic group deliberately avoiding learning and using the written language as a means of protest. In other words, a need was seen by a non-Buddhist group for the development of a countervailing cultural force in response to perceived threats from the centre of intellectual and political power in Tibet, located in the south of the plateau.

This cultural dissonance almost certainly involved the Bon po or at least a particular group of them and the Buddhists. Rivalries between the Bon po and Buddhists continued at gNam mtsho until at least the 13th century. A biographical account of the sTag lung pa bla ma, Kong po dar shes, records that he had a magical contest with an unnamed Bon po adept in which he emerged victorious resulting in the eviction of Bon po from the area (*sTag lung chos 'byung*: 300-301). In the biography of sTag lung Chos sku sangs rgyas yar byon (1203-1272), special care is taken to mention that the legendary non-Buddhist progenitor of the 'brog pa of the gNam mtsho region Bra gu ngom ngan, paid his respects to the bla ma and accompanied him to the sTag lung dgon pa where he died (*sTag lung chos 'byung*: 292-93). Evidently, relations between the two religions were very sensitive and marked with conflict at this period of time. These biographical accounts indicate that until the second diffusion of Buddhism represented at gNam mtsho by practitioners such as Kong po dar shes, rGwa lo lo tsa ba (12th century), Sangs rgyas yar byon (1203-1272) and rGyal ba lo ras pa (1187-1250), the Bon po retained control over gNam mtsho ⁽⁷⁾. The painting of the symbols at bKra shis

⁽⁶⁾ Photographs of the figures in the kLu khang were inspected by Bon's most eminent scholar sLob dpon bsTan 'dzin rNam dag in October 1995 and by sMan ri mkhan po in December 1995. Both of these scholars observed that the figures are not comparable with the system of writing used in Zhang zhung based on the sMar script nor with any contemporary Bon symbolism.

⁽⁷⁾ The adventures of rGyal ba lo ras pa at gNam mtsho and his winning of the admiration of the native people are found in an biography compiled from different sources and published in *Bod ljongs nang bstan*. Cf. pp. 96-100. A mention rGwa lo lo tsa ba's visit to gNam mtsho where he practiced meditation for seven years is found in the *Blue Annals*. Cf. Roerich 1976: 614. According to rTse sprul thub bstan rgyal mtshan rin po che, other famous religious personalities of the same general historical period who visited gNam mtsho include, Mi la ras pa, Pha da pa sangs rgyas, Ras chung pa, Dus gsum mkhyan pa and Sa skya pandita Kun' dag rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po among others. Cf. *Bod ljongs nang bstan*, pp. 24-25. From these accounts it is clear that from the 11th to 14th century gNam mtsho was an exceptionally important magnet for Buddhist pilgrimage and devotion. As a direct result of this attraction, the Bon po were effectively dislodged from the region.

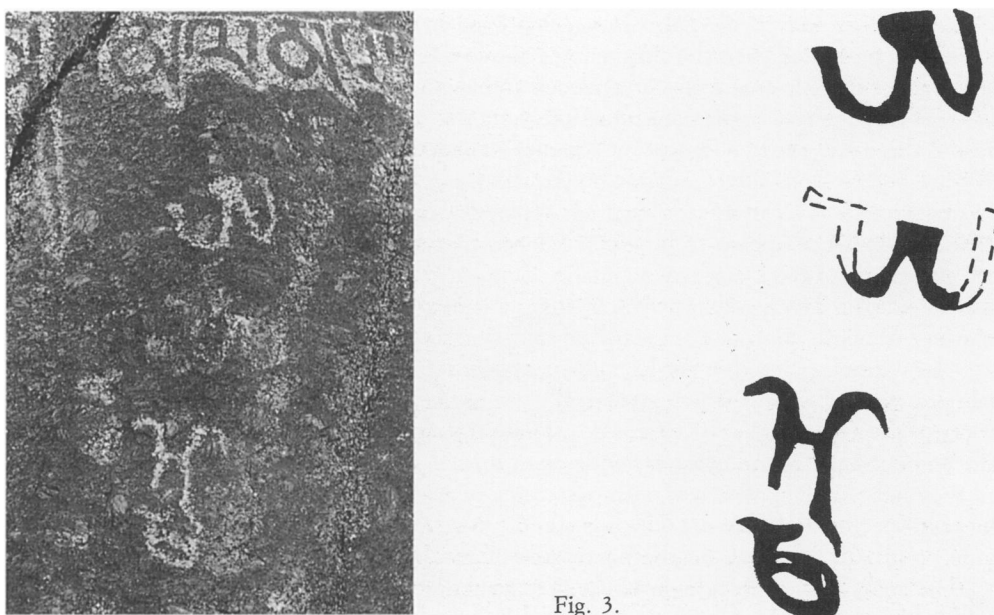


Fig. 3.

do would have had to have taken place before the Buddhization of the region was completed because a sophisticated literary tradition based on the common Tibetan language and script and exercised throughout Tibet, is documented for the Bon po beginning with the rediscovery of hidden texts (*gter ma*) by gShen chen klu dga (996-1035) (Karmay 1975: 184). Subsequent to this, there would have been little incentive to corrupt the Tibetan script, to create crude symbolic approximations of it or to design an alternative system of writing, as the Bon po were of their own accord, well disposed towards the use of the Tibetan written language. The analysis provided above points to the figures in the ancillary chamber of the kLu khang as having been painted between the end of the 8th century and the early 11th century, that is, from the official abolition of Bon, to the time when a definite corpus of Bon literature emerged, setting the groundwork for the Bon canonical tradition.

The creation of a secret cultic system of notation or symbolism probably had its origins in the *de'u* tradition and it is probably essential to the process of deciphering the symbols. The *de'u* was originally a pre-Buddhist lore which employed symbols, riddles and secret languages to disseminate information and is well known in Tibetan literature (cf. Norbu 1995; Stein 1972). The term probably originated in Zhang zhung and has the import of intelligence or understanding, and it was an important instrument of power for the Tibetan kings, although its exact meaning is unknown (Norbu 1995: 212).

If the symbology at bKra shis do was an isolated phenomena there might be a tendency to disregard it or shrug it off as an unimportant cultural eccentricity, but the discovery of similar shaped figures inscribed on a boulder 350 km away at Dangra g.yu mtsho suggests that the use of these symbols enjoyed a wide geographical distribution. On the east side of Dang ra g.yu mtsho, on a boulder near the retreat caves of g.Yung drung lha rtse, four figures have been inscribed (Fig. 3). They are arranged in a vertical row below the Bon mantra, *A' dkar*

A rmad du tri su nag po zhi zhi mal mal engraved in *dbu can* letters. They are more worn and heavily patinated than the Bon mantra above them indicating that they are older. They are also more roughly engraved into the rock and apparently were made with less sophisticated tools. The upper two figures are remarkably similar to the upper row of figures in sequence one and three and the two figures in sequence two of the bKra shis do specimens. Moreover, the third figure from the top is not unlike the third figure from the left in the second row of sequence one. The lower most figure is apparently quite unlike anything else found at gNam mtsho. It does not appear to be a coincidence that similar enigmatic symbols are found at both gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho. It is far more likely that they are part of a discrete phase of cultural development on the Byang thang of widespread significance, and emblematic of an era of acute conflict between Bon and Buddhism.

The symbols painted in the kLu khang at bKra shis do are closely associated with several anthropomorphic figures which stylistically are unlike anything else found in the formidable variety of cave paintings at bKra shis do. These figures are distinguished by large round heads with bulbous ears, round eyes and wide open mouths. Their torsos are rectangular in shape and they have stick appendages with outstretched arms and stick-like fingers (Figs. 4 and 5). The only specimen of cave art which is similar in style is a lone figure in a cave called sTong shong phug 100 km away on the north side of the lake.

The anthropomorphic depiction at sTong shong phug has the same round head, bulbous ears, wide open mouth and other anatomical features of the kLu khang figures (Fig. 6). The major difference between them is that the sTong shong phug figure wears a peaked cap that resembles a Tibetan monk's ceremonial hat and its torso is broad in the shoulders and tapers down to a narrow waist. There are no sequences of unrecognizable symbols at sTong shong phug but instead, a welter of crudely painted Tibetan lettering. The most prominent of these is a laudatory passage that reads *Kun 'tu bzang mkhyen* (Kun tu bzang po of revered wisdom). It is clumsily written between the peak of the anthropomorphic figure's cap and an overhang in the rear of the cave. The poor quality script and the misspelled '*tu*' (the prefix letter '*a*' is unnecessary) demonstrate that the passage was written by someone lacking literary sophistication. This mention of the Primordial Buddha also indicates that there are cultural parallels between sTong shong phug and the kLu khang. The phoneme *rgyo* has also been prominently written but its meaning has not been established. There are also letter *A*'s and the word *gyag* scrawled on the rear of the cave which is an invective for sex. Symbolic motifs at sTong shong phug include a well executed *mchod rten* and a Bon *g.yung drung*. The chaotic juxtaposition of writing and motifs, the presence of lewd graffiti and the superimposition of passages graphically portray that sTong shong phug was the site of a clash of interests between rival religious groups. The conflict attested to in the visual record of the cave has not been conclusively dated but certainly would have occurred before gNam mtsho was fully brought under the control of the sTag lung and 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud sects in the 12th and 13th centuries.

There is no question that sTong shong phug was a Bon po stronghold prior to the region's subjugation by the Buddhists. According to local oral histories, this cave was a centre for the ancient Bon po and their religious rites ⁽⁸⁾. Local legends speak of a time when a flood

⁽⁸⁾ The oral history of sTong shong phug was collected from several local sources, the most notable being Cha do rin po che, whose old monastery was located only three kilometers away.

blocked the entrance to the cave forcing the Bon po to escape through the roof. This legend undoubtedly was encouraged by the naturally occurring opening found in the roof of the cave. The environs around sTong shong phug are almost certainly the residence or ancient ritual headquarters of the powerful protector Yum, an emanation of Srid pa'i rgyal mo, cited in a Bon text ⁽⁹⁾. On a bench in front of the cave, are a number of faintly visible stone foundations where the Zhang zhung dGu khri stong shong rdzong might

⁽⁹⁾ According to the *sadbana* and *bskong ba* text, *Yum sras lnga'i gtor bskong*, rediscovered by dPon gsas Khyung rgod rtsal, the mind manifestation of Yum is named Ma bdud khro nyer srid pa'i rgyal who resides in the dGu khri stong shong rdzong located at Khri rdus sdong tshogs. This is the most wrathful and strident in language of several texts devoted to her. Cf. *Bskang 'Bum*, vol. 2, nos. 145-55.



Figs. 4-5.

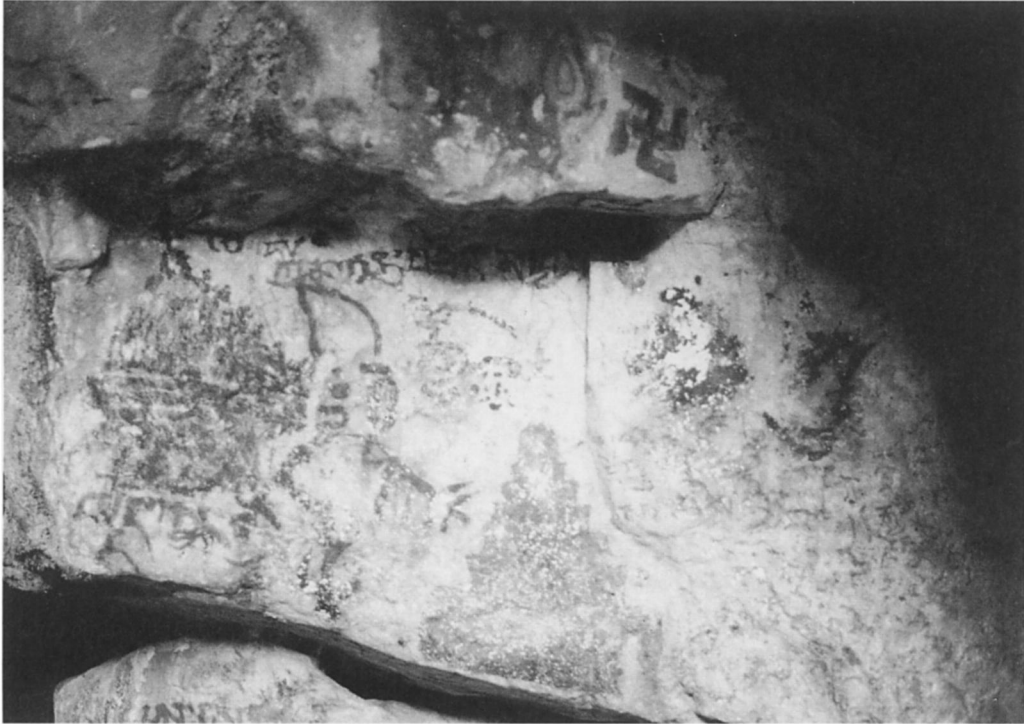


Fig. 6.

well have stood. If so, sTong shong phug is the site of one of a number of pre-Buddhist monuments at gNam mtsho just now coming to light ⁽¹⁰⁾. While the paintings inside the cave recall a period of struggle between Bon and Buddhism, the cultural significance of the cave itself and associated structures might be much older, reflecting a cultural heritage extending back into the Bronze Age or Stone Age. It is worth noting that the site has no Buddhist associations in the native oral histories and is one of several purely Bon po places at gNam mtsho.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For a review of recently discovered archaeological sites at gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho, cf. Bellezza 1996.

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