



## Alchi Petroglyph Field

Ladakh, India, Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE)

### Early Himalayan Rock Art

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#### The Prototypic Hunter

IN THIS ROCK ART COMPOSITION dating from the Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE), we see a hunting scene etched in stone featuring the ibex, a large and powerful wild goat species widely distributed in the highlands of west and Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> This evocative scene is found in Ladakh, a crossroads region in the northwest corner of the Tibetan Plateau. Ladakh commands a highly strategic position in the Himalayas, joining Tibet with the Central Asian, Persian, and Indian realms. Archaeological and art historical evidence clearly shows that Ladakh has been a meeting point for peoples and a hub of trade and exchange for millennia.

Creating art in one form or another is a fundamental human impulse found in all societies. Naturally occurring stone surfaces offer one of the oldest and most universal picture-making mediums. This enduring means of expression rewards archaeologists with unparalleled insights into the cultural composition, social structure, and economic functions of ancient peoples worldwide. In Himalayan regions, including the Tibetan Plateau, artists began to leave their mark in stone during the Bronze Age (ca. 2000–700 BCE) by carving and painting cave walls, cliffs, and boulders, and they continued to do so until well into the second millennium CE.<sup>2</sup> This unbroken tradition of rock art production records many routine activities and conceptions, ranging from hunting and martial scenes to ceremonial life and symbolic information. As Himalayan rock art developed over a period of more than two thousand years, it serves as an index of human progress beginning with archaic religious cults and culminating in the spread of the prevailing religions of the Tibetan world: Buddhism and Bon. No other Himalayan art form has proven as durable or encompassing as that set down in stone.

In the Alchi composition, a solitary archer stands among four ibexes, each of which sports a large pair of horns arching over the spine. The human figure wielding a bow and arrow has a modified bi-triangular torso, a popular style of anthropomorphic depiction in the rock art of Ladakh and Tibet to the east. These human and animal figures, competently executed by means of abrading the surface of the boulder, possess a bold, well-balanced appearance, endowing the composition with a fine pictorial effect. The hunter is shown taking aim at the ibex directly in front of him, clearly poised to slay it. This unambiguous signal of success has a metaphoric dimension, for shooting an arrow so close to a game animal is impractical. Rather, the perspective used in the work stresses the prowess of the hunter as a provider of sustenance, while at the same time articulating various social and religious calculations that accompanied this most basic of human activities. In fact, hunting scenes throughout the vast Asian hinterland often present hunters with bows and arrows in very close quarters to their prey (ibexes, deer, wild sheep, wild yaks, and so on), the literal documentation of the hunt assuming second place to a set of grandstanding social considerations and ritualized demonstrations.

#### Hunting Scenes More Broadly

The hunting of game animals is the single most common rock art theme in Ladakh. Ibex hunting scenes number in the thousands, carved in a variety of styles relying on a number of techniques for cutting and grinding the surface of boulders and outcrops.<sup>3</sup> The pursuit of ibex is also prominent in the rock art of the adjoining Trans-Himalayan region of Spiti in India, as well as in many other Inner Asian territories, comprising Mongolia, Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, and southeastern Kazakhstan.

For more about the Bon religion, see Bon Deity Tsochok Khagying, no. 60.

A rock art composition featuring a lone archer coming in for the final kill of ibexes; Alchi, Ladakh, India; Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE); photograph by J. V. Bellezza



One of three striped carnivores carved on a boulder; Alchi, Ladakh, India; Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE); photograph by J. V. Bellezza



Farther west, ibex hunting is well known in the rock art of the Middle East. In lower-lying locales on the Tibetan Plateau, where agriculture came to be practiced, hunting was relegated to a subsistence venture of secondary importance for the bulk of the population by the Iron Age.<sup>4</sup> Although the overall economic importance of hunting had diminished in Ladakh and other parts of the

Tibetan Plateau by the time the composition of the lone hunter was fashioned, the sheer number of such scenes offers evidence that hunting pursuits retained their high prestige and cultural centrality. The critical social and religious values that hunting articulated in the Bronze and Iron Ages appear to have been derived from an even more remote era, when hunting and foraging served as the economic bedrock for inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau.

#### Other Rock Art at Alchi

Most of the rock art found in Alchi was made on boulders scattered along a shelf rising above the south bank of the Indus River, approximately one and a quarter miles (two kilometers) northwest of the village of Alchi and its renowned Buddhist temple complex. Carvers favored boulders covered in a shiny dark purplish patina for embellishment. In addition to ibex hunting scenes, petroglyphs at the site display ibexes engraved together with spotted carnivores resembling snow leopards, facsimiles of stepped architectural structures, including elaborate stupas (a Buddhist religious monument), a menagerie of animals, groups of swastikas, and combat or martial contests.<sup>5</sup> Rock art with the same types of subjects and compositions rendered in analogous styles can be seen all along a sixty-two-mile (a hundred-kilometer) stretch of the Indus River extending from Alchi to Dah. Some of the boulders with rock art in Alchi and nearby sites contain Tibetan inscriptions composed during the Tibetan Imperial period (ca. 600–850 CE).<sup>6</sup> Inscriptions and rock art in Ladakh made as late as the fourteenth century CE signal the death throes of the ancient tradition of rock carving (although engraving rocks for religious and more informal reasons has continued in the region to the present day). A long line of earthen stupas and a ruined fortress located on the same shelf demonstrate the enduring attraction of the Alchi rock art site. Old gold mines in the vicinity underline the economic significance of the area.

#### A Conveyor of Interregional Exchange

Prowling striped carnivores (probably tigers) comprise another category of iconic rock art at Alchi. Of special note are three striped carnivores found on a single boulder, which has become unmoored and is now precariously perched above the Indus River. The complete petroglyph of one of these tigrine animals covered in chevronlike stripes (seen with part of another striped carnivore and other petroglyphs) undeniably makes a strong impression with its pointed ears, gaping jaws, large round eye, flexed legs, and tail curling over the back. The form and design of the carnivore are emblematic of the “Eurasian animal style,” which features peculiar modes of zoomorphic portrayal in various metals, stone, and textiles diffused across much of the continent in the Iron Age.

The distinctive Eurasian animal style is well represented in the rock art of the Tibetan Plateau and other parts of Inner Asia, which typically boasts graceful and sinuous wild sheep, deer, and wild yaks with fancy horns standing on the tips of their hooves.<sup>7</sup> Both wild herbivores and carnivores typically bear volutes or scrolls as body decoration (in the petroglyph of the striped carnivore, these curvilinear motifs are replaced by interconnected dots). The styles of tigrine creatures vary from region to region, as individual cultures selectively adopted elements of the Eurasian animal style to conform to their own purposes and inclinations. However, this body of rock art also has much in common. A shared legacy

See Stupa at Toling Monastery, no. 19.

For a related depiction of wild herbivores on a Tibetan gold death mask, see Gold Burial Mask with Engraved Figures, no. 2.



Rock paintings in red ocher of a conjoined sun and moon, two sunbursts, a tree, and two swastikas; Chukargyam, Rutok, Tibet; Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE) or Protohistoric period (ca. 100–600 CE); photograph by J. V. Bellezza

in form, presentation, and execution followed from far-reaching artistic, intellectual, and technological exchanges among diverse peoples. Participant cultures on the Tibetan Plateau and those in northwest China, northern Pakistan, Mongolia, southern Siberia, and southeastern Central Asia drew from a wellspring of allied ideas and sensibilities, contributing to the formation of a transcultural sphere in Iron Age Inner Asia. This emergent order anticipated by a millennium the cosmopolitan era that arose along the Silk Road in the first millennium of the Common Era (partially facilitated by the spread of Buddhism).

### The Abstract and the Religious

On the Tibetan Plateau figurative art showcasing humans, animals, architectural structures, implements, and other objects is richly supplemented by subjects having symbolic value.<sup>8</sup> The image on the left highlights an array of rock paintings or pictographs consisting of special characters that probably represented far more than their outward appearance alone suggests. To this day, the same symbols are used in the Bon and Buddhist religions to signify a wide range of ritual processes, philosophical teachings, and mystic notions. Even though we cannot know precisely what the long-lost artist working at Chukargyam was attempting to communicate with his intriguing set of pictographs, archaic mytho-ritual texts written in Tibetan between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE furnish clues regarding their potential meaning. For instance, we know that the conjoined sun and moon epitomized major priestly lineages and that the swastika was synonymous with the sun, while the tree was a major cosmological motif. Analogous sets of symbols are found in the rock art of Ladakh and Spiti, which indicates that these adjoining regions of the Tibetan Plateau were closely connected religiously to western Tibet well before the rise of Bon and Buddhism and widespread literacy in the eighth century CE.

In brief, rock art is one of the most potent tools available to us for understanding the way of life of early peoples residing in the loftiest lands on earth. Moreover, Tibetan and Himalayan rock art confirms that its ancient makers did not live an isolated existence but for millennia strove to relate to other peoples of Eurasia.

### Further Reading

Bellezza, John V. 2020b. *Drawn and Written in Stone: An Inventory of Stepped Structures and Early Rock Inscriptions in Upper Tibet (ca. 100 BCE to 1400 CE)*. British Archaeological Reports International Series 2995. Oxford: BAR.

Linrothe, Rob. 2016b. *Seeing into Stone: Pre-Buddhist Petroglyphs and Zangskar's Early Inhabitants*. Berlin: Studio Orientalia.

Suolang Wangdui (Bsod nams dbang 'dus). 1994. *Art of Tibetan Rock Paintings*. Introduction by Li Yongxian and Huo Wei. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.

### Notes

- 1 I want to heartily thank Quentin Devers and Viraf Mehta for detailed information and photographs of the Alchi rock art site prior to my own visit there in August 2021.
- 2 Rock carvings are commonly known as petroglyphs and rock paintings as pictographs. For a discussion of these techniques and output in western Tibet, see Bellezza 2002a and 2008.
- 3 On ibexes in the rock art of Ladakh, see Bruneau 2010; Francfort, Klodzinski, and Mascle 1992. On other rock art featuring the hunt, see Bellezza 2002b.
- 4 Questions concerning the prehistoric cultural composition of Ladakh and western Tibet are addressed in Bellezza 2018 and 2020a; Bruneau and Bellezza 2013.
- 5 According to Bruneau 2010, the Alchi site consists of 24 anthropomorphic figures, 91 zoomorphic figures, and 328 stepped structures, as well as 131 rock inscriptions.
- 6 For surveys of Tibetan rock inscriptions in Ladakh, see Denwood 1980; Orofino 1990; Takeuchi 2012.
- 7 For a detailed study of Tibetan rock art and objects in the Eurasian style, see Bellezza 2020c.
- 8 On symbols in the rock art of Ladakh and adjoining regions of Tibet, see Bellezza 2017 and 2000.