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CONTENTS

- 3 **Art, perception and information processing: an evolutionary perspective**
Derek Hodgson (United Kingdom)
With Comments by Robert G. Bednarik, John L. Bradshaw, Paul Faulstich, Sylvia Fein, John Feliks, Elery Hamilton-Smith and Andrew Sherratt; and author's Reply
- 35 **Bon rock paintings at gNam mtsho: glimpses of the ancient religion of northern Tibet**
John Vincent Bellezza (U.S.A.)
- 56 **Spencer and Gillen's contribution to Australian rock art studies**
R. G. Gunn (Australia)
- 65 **Brief Reports**
- 65 'Archaeologically dated Palaeolithic rock art' at Fariseu, C \hat{o} a valley
- 65 Fariseu rock art not archaeologically dated
(Mila Sim \tilde{o} es de Abreu and Robert G. Bednarik)
- 68 Symposia of the Third AURA Congress
- 69 **Orientation**
- 69 Third AURA Congress — Short Field Trips Program — Additional major field trips
- 72 Response to the Cairns Declaration: a code of ethics for AURA (Noelene Cole and Graeme K. Ward)
- 75 Notes — Forthcoming events — New AURA members
- 77 **IFRAO Report No. 24**
IFRAO: the first dozen years — New IFRAO members — Fifth International Rock Art Symposium, Bolivia, September 2000 — Skopje 2002


 The logo for AURA (The Australian Rock Art Research Association) is displayed in a stylized, lowercase font. The letters are composed of multiple parallel lines, creating a sense of depth and texture. The 'a' and 'u' are particularly prominent, with their loops and curves defined by these multiple lines.



KEYWORDS: *Rock painting - Bon - Buddhism - Mythology - Inscription - Shamanism - Tibet*

BON ROCK PAINTINGS AT GNAM MTSO: GLIMPSES OF THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF NORTHERN TIBET

John Vincent Bellezza

Abstract. Thus far the largest concentration of rock paintings discovered in Tibet is located at gNam mtsho, the second largest lake on the plateau. This paper examines a selection of these paintings which are linked to Bon, the old religion of Tibet. Bon rock paintings at gNam mtsho belong to both the early Bon period (Metal Age to 10th century) and the subsequent period when the Bon religion came under heavy Buddhist influence. This palaeoart tradition comprised of both inscriptions and representational forms has the potential capability to serve as independent verification of textual sources of information on Tibetan history.

Introduction

This paper examines rock paintings and inscriptions associated with the Bon religion, many of which have been documented for the first time by me. These paintings are located in various caves found at gNam mtsho (Celestial Lake), the nearly 2000 square kilometre body of water situated about 120 kilometres north of Tibet's capital, Lhasa (Fig. 1). gNam mtsho, located in the Byang thang (Northern Plains), has long had a sacred status and was associated with early Bon adepts who resided at the lake until the 8th century (Bellezza 1997a: 168-72, 286-7; Karmay 1972: 27, 48-9). The Bon rock art and inscriptions of gNam mtsho are highly valuable historical resources which corroborate and augment textual sources of information.

In the Bon tradition, gNam mtsho is closely associated with the saint sTong rgyung mthu chen who lived no later than the 8th century. In the *Lung stan bzhugs so*, the prophecies of Dran pa Nam 'mkha, it states (folio No. 75):

At gNam mtsho headland the scholar sTong rgyung did the [tantric] practice of the Twelve Consecrations. At that time, the King [sPu lde gung rgyal] who fostered all under the law, invited the scholar Khod spungs (Dran pa Nam 'mkha) to ask his advice.

In the same text, it records that after his death, sTong rgyung was cremated at the largest island of gNam mtsho which is now known as Srin mo do (folio no. 76):

When [Dran pa Nam 'mkha] was 157 years of age the scholar sTong rgyung died. At that time Khod spungs (Dran pa Nam 'mkha) built a throne (*bier*) [with the design] of two overlapping white lions supported by a strong man at the island of the bellicose *srin po* in the west. It was constructed five spans in height and six spans in length. Sandalwood and *ko la ka shi* were used to cremate his remains, his 108th incarnation. His corpse was carried by all the orders of the *lha ma srin sde brgyad* and *mkha' 'gro* (types of elemental deities) [to the *bier*].

Lung stan bzhugs so (folio No. 90) records that during the persecution of Bon, texts were hidden at places such as gNam mtsho and entrusted to Yum sras, the powerful goddess who manifests in gNam mtsho.

Until the last decade little was known about the rock art of Tibet. The documentation of Tibetan rock paintings was commenced in Ru thog county in 1985 (in the extreme north-west of the country) by the Cultural Relics Investigation Team under the Administrative Committee of the Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (Zhang Jian-ling 1987; Chayet 1994: 64-8). In the 1990s both petroglyphs and rock paintings have been discovered at sixty sites in thirteen counties (Chen Zhao Fu 1996: 129). The most comprehensive study to date is that detailed in the book *Art of Tibetan rock paintings* which pictorially documents many of the Tibetan sites and includes a trilingual introduction (Tibetan, Chinese and English) (Suolang Wangdui 1994). The largest concentration of rock art sites (approximately one-half of the total) is in the Byang thang, the vast plains of northern and western Tibet (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 29). A small selection of rock paintings at gNam mtsho was first published by Heffner (1990), but it was not until research carried out under the direction of Suolang Wangdui (1994: 164-205) that the breadth and significance of the paintings came to be appreciated (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 164-205). An analysis of cave paintings found at the lake is included in Bellezza (1997a: Chs 4, 5). In October of 1997, I returned to gNam mtsho to continue my survey of rock art, examining unrecorded sites. During 1997 and 1998, I also surveyed rock paintings at Da rog mtsho and bKra ri gnam mtsho in the Byang thang. These paintings primarily feature Bon motifs (Bellezza 1999, 2000).

Rock paintings at gNam mtsho are found in more

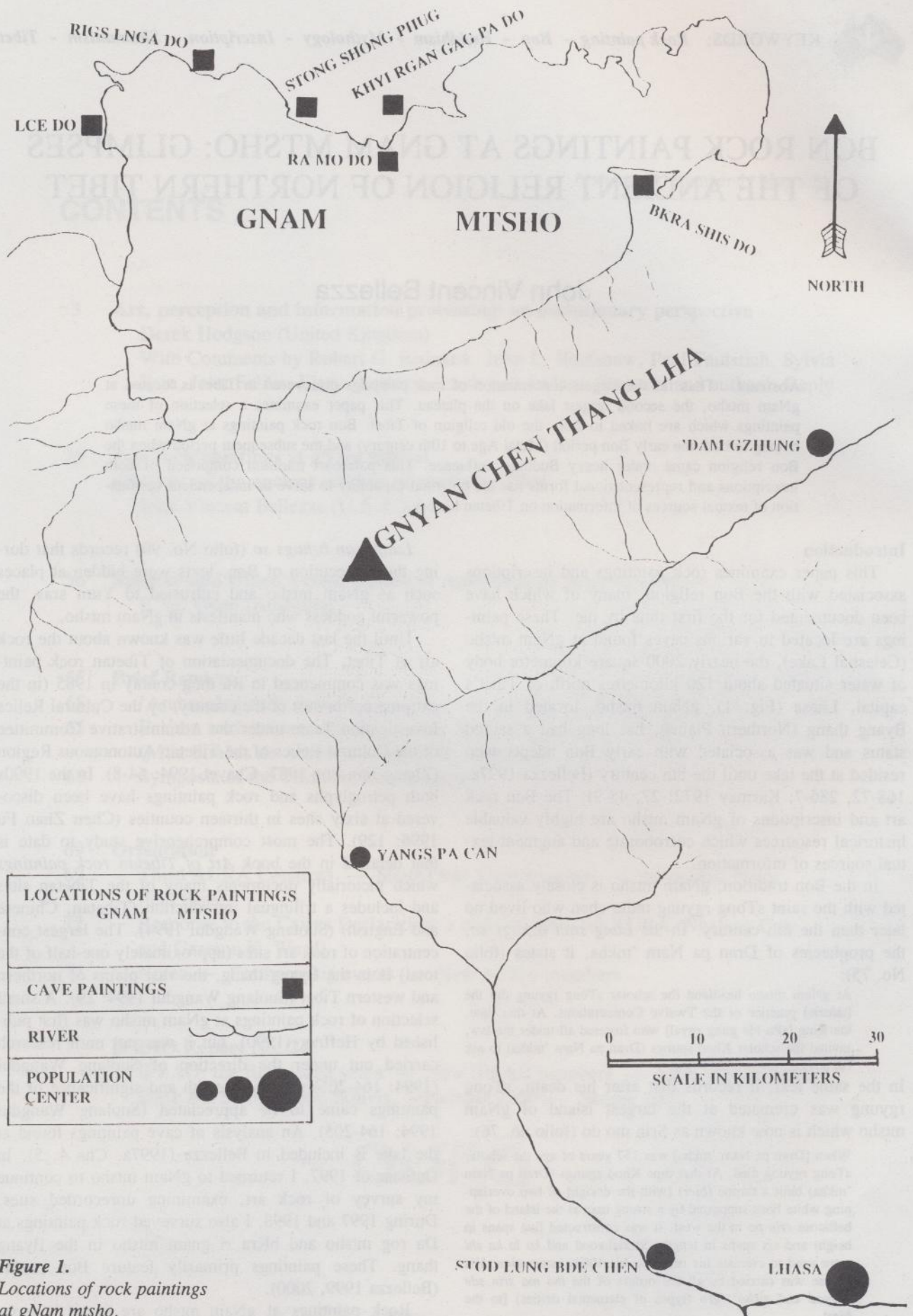


Figure 1.
Locations of rock paintings
at gNam mts'ho.

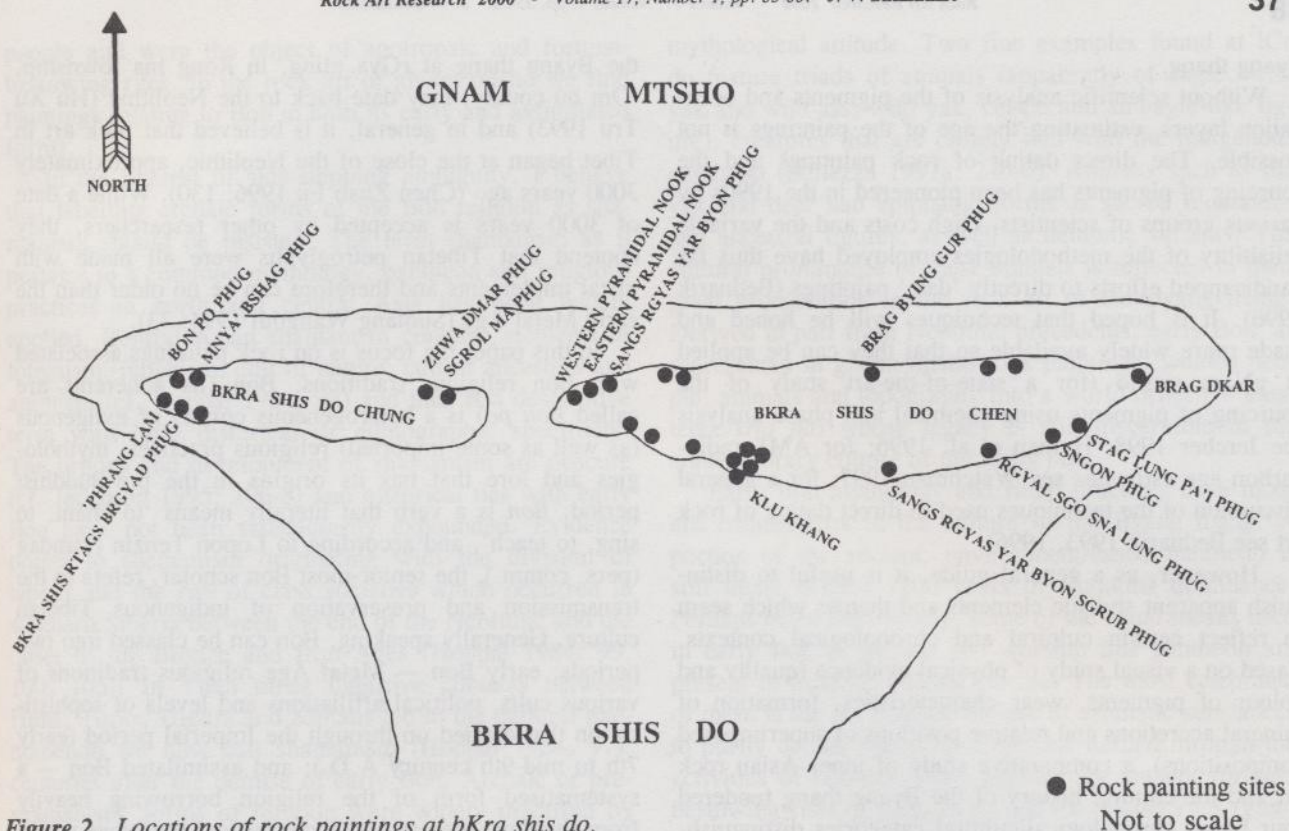


Figure 2. Locations of rock paintings at bKra shis do.

than three dozen caves and niches in six locations on the south-east, north and west sides of the lake. Some of these locations are highly remote, which in part explains why it has taken so long for this extraordinary rock art resource to come to light. In total, there are about 450 legible iconic motifs, a wealth of inscriptions and swastikas, minor and incomplete paintings, and indistinguishable lines, blotches and markings, bringing the total number of motifs to well over 2000. The identification and interpretation of these compositions is facilitated by the long continuity in the Byang thang pastoral culture. The indigenous people called *'brog pa* have maintained ancient traditions, mythologies and practices which are invaluable in decoding the significance of a portion of the rock art. A similar situation exists in Australia and perhaps in central India, where there are intact aboriginal cultural traditions (cf. also Novellino 1999, concerning Philippines). In addition, the vast literary heritage of Tibet aids in the interpretation and analysis of the paintings.

Subject matter found in this rock art includes a large number of apparent hunting and pastoral scenes, 'dancers', Bon and Buddhist priests, possible battle and duelling scenes, sacred symbols, inscriptions, and the depiction of supernatural beings and events (Bellezza 1997a). While general structural and thematic similarities with Eurasian steppe cultures are indicated, it must be stressed that the paintings of gNam mtsHo are part of a distinctive Byang thang genre of paintings (Bellezza 1997a: 421-5). Within this regional art form is a variety of styles and subject matter reflecting diverse cultural patterns and chronologies.

My findings show that cultural influences affecting

Byang thang rock art are very complex and that there was more than one centre of primary cultural diffusion. Archaic themes in Byang thang rock art bear an affinity with the ungulate petroglyph traditions of southern Siberia and Mongolia which it is thought arose no later than the Neolithic. Later vectors of influence were Bronze Age Indo-Iranian cultures and the Iron Age Saka and Scythian tribes (for examples of supposed Saka-Scythian rock art in the Byang thang see Suolang Wangdui 1994: 30, 34-36, 50; Francfort et al. 1992). It has been proposed that, beginning in Inner Mongolia, petroglyph traditions diffused north-west as far as the Altai mountains in Xinjiang (eastern Turkestan) and as far west and south as Ru thog and Nag chu in Tibet, coming under the influence of various early cultures within their new range (Tang Huisheng 1993: 89). Cultural vectors which could have effected such a transmission include the Chiang, Xiong Nu and Scythians.

While Byang thang rock art has thematic (dominant animal and hunting motifs) and stylistic (bold, vibrant execution of compositions) affinities with steppe art there are fundamental differences. Mascoids, zoomorphs in 'combat', heraldic pairs of 'carnivores', 'camels' and chariots — five distinguishing features of steppe art — are not well represented in Byang thang rock art. There are also variations in the artistic rendition of animals. As such, this rock art should not be lumped in a regional category with the northern steppe regions. Perhaps the most defining feature of these regional differences is the lack of wheeled vehicles in the rock art of the Byang thang. The chariot had a profound impact on cultural development in the steppes of the second and first millennium B.C., an impact that perhaps did not reach the

Byang thang.

Without scientific analysis of the pigments and occupation layers, estimating the age of the paintings is not possible. The direct dating of rock paintings and the sourcing of pigments has been pioneered in the 1990s by various groups of scientists. High costs and the variable reliability of the methodologies employed have thus far handicapped efforts to directly 'date' paintings (Bednarik 1996). It is hoped that techniques will be honed and made more widely available so that they can be applied at gNam mtsho (for a state-of-the-art study of the sourcing of pigments using chemical and phase analysis see Jercher 1998; Hyman et al. 1996; for AMS radiocarbon age estimates see Watchman 1997; for a general discussion of the techniques used in direct dating of rock art see Bednarik 1993, 1996).

However, as a general guide, it is useful to distinguish apparent stylistic elements and themes which seem to reflect certain cultural and chronological contexts. Based on a visual study of physical evidence (quality and colour of pigments, wear characteristics, formation of mineral accretions and relative positions of superimposed compositions), a comparative study of inner Asian rock art and the cultural history of the Byang thang rendered four broad chronological/cultural categories distinguishable: (1) early motifs, perhaps Eneolithic to the beginning of the Historic period (7th century); (2) Bon motifs, Iron Age - 13th century A.D.; (3) Buddhist motifs, 7th century to at least the 17th century A.D.; and (4) 'folk motifs', contemporaneous with the Buddhist period. Bon motifs can potentially be further divided into those that predate or postdate the introduction of the Tibetan script in the early 7th century; and those painted after the rise of an assimilated form of the Bon religion in the late 10th century.

The earliest paintings at gNam mtsho are found at the bKra shis do and lCe do sites and seem to belong to the end of the long epoch of hunting as a primary economic activity some 3000 years ago. However, in the absence of archaeometric data, the possibility that certain paintings might be much older cannot be discounted. Archaeological data suggest that roughly 3000 years ago, metal implements were introduced on a large scale in Tibet (Bellezza 1997a: 280-1; Chayet 1994: 55-6, 60; Chen Zhao Fu 1996: 130). This period coincides with the termination of the Eneolithic hunting culture and the introduction of the horse and pastoralism as the primary means of livelihood in the Byang thang. These cultural and technological changes can be viewed in the wider context of Eurasian archaeology. In central Asia and southern Siberia people riding horses reportedly begin to appear in the petroglyph record no earlier than the middle of the second millennium B.C. (Sher and Garyeva 1996: 121), and only with the great burial at Arzhan, Tuva, in the 8th century B.C., does tackle indicate that the horse was commonly used for riding (Jacobson 1993: 117-8). The beginning of the Metal Age in Tibet also coincides with the development of Eurasian stock breeding (nomadism) in its modern form. Petroglyphs in

the Byang thang at rGya gling, in Rong ma township, 'Om bu county, may date back to the Neolithic (Hu Xu Tru 1993) and in general, it is believed that rock art in Tibet began at the close of the Neolithic, approximately 3000 years ago (Chen Zhao Fu 1996: 130). While a date of 3000 years is accepted by other researchers, they contend that Tibetan petroglyphs were all made with metal implements and therefore can be no older than the early Metal Age (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 33).

In this paper the focus is on rock paintings associated with Bon religious traditions. Bon (its adherents are called *Bon po*) is a heterogeneous corpus of indigenous (as well as some imported) religious practices, mythologies and lore that has its origins in the pre-Buddhist period. *Bon* is a verb that literally means 'to chant, to sing, to teach', and according to Lopon Tenzin Namdag (pers. comm.), the senior-most Bon scholar, refers to the transmission and preservation of indigenous Tibetan culture. Generally speaking, Bon can be classed into two periods: early Bon — Metal Age religious traditions of various cults, political affiliations and levels of sophistication that carried on through the Imperial period (early 7th to mid-9th century A.D.); and assimilated Bon — a systematised form of the religion borrowing heavily from Buddhist literary and ecclesiastical traditions which appeared at the end of the 10th century. Early Bon, as revealed in the Tun-huang manuscripts, was a religion with royal patronage, which had a complex hierarchy of priests and magicians using elaborate liturgies and rites¹.

Along with the royal cult were other forms of early Bon practised by people at large through the course of Tibet's history from the Metal Age onwards. Indeed, if we accept the widest definition of Bon then even the Stone Age religions of Tibet would have to be subsumed under it (and indeed there is such a Tibetan tradition, called brDol Bon). To avoid the confusion which would ensue by labelling every ancient practice as Bon, I chronologically differentiate between it and traditions which had their origins in the Stone Age. Yet I hasten to add that this is an imperfect attribution because of the high level of religious syncretism exhibited in Tibet through the ages. Bon defined as a post-Stone Age religion is subscribed to by other authors as well (Norbu 1995).

The core of these popular forms of Bon appears to have been the placation and worship of deities residing in natural objects and phenomena with the intention to bring about concord between human society and the kindred society of numina (Bellezza 1997a). Much effort was placed on maintaining the ritual order between people and the various classes of spirits in a bid to control the vagaries of nature and to ensure personal well-being. Topographical features such as mountains and lakes were believed to be the protectors and ancestors of the

¹ For a survey of Bon religion in the Imperial period see, for example Lalou (1953), Karmay (1998), Chu Junjie (1991). For a general historical and cultural survey of the religion in both its early and assimilated forms see Karmay (1998), Norbu (1995), Kvaerne (1995). For an essay examining the breadth of Bon cultural history see Norbu (1998).

people and were the object of apotropaic and fortune-bestowing rites. In the rock art of gNam mtsho we find paintings relating to Bon in both its early and assimilated forms.

In the interest of side-stepping ambiguity, I believe that labelling archaic forms of the Bon religion as shamanism should be resisted. The term shamanism as it pertains to a common mythology, pantheon and religious practices in north and central Asia has been widely applied. Central Asian shamanism contains elements of totemism, fetishism, cult of nature, cult of ancestors and animism (cf. Hoppál 1984: 98) and thus is a descriptive term with little historical or ethnographic specificity. The origins and development of shamanism are obscure (cf. Jacobson 1995: 206-8) and historical ties with early Bon have not been satisfactorily expounded. Evidence points to shamanism originating with the division of labour and the rise of class societies which occurred in southern Siberia between the end of the Neolithic and the onset of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Hoppál 1984: 99, 100, 105). In Yuan times intensive contacts between Huns, Turks, Uigurs and Khitans led to the cultural phenomenon we now call shamanism (Hoppál 1984: 97), centuries after the demise of early Bon. Archaic or pre-shamanistic forms of religion were widely practised by Siberian aborigines and included nature worship, hunting rituals, ancestor cults etc. (Taksami 1984: 451; Jacobson 1995: 172-3, 180). For example, it is believed that Mongolian and Turkic mountain cults are pre-shamanistic (Jacobson 1995: 180-2). Although the picture is far from clear, ethnographic data and rock art suggest that the origin of cultural linkages between north and central Asia and the Byang thang is pre-shamanistic.

Bon scriptures record that early practitioners, such as the great scholar sTong rgyung mThu chen, had close relationships with deities incumbent in the environment. So intimate was this relationship that sTong rgyung's consort was an emanation of gNam mtsho. In a Bon text, by Dran pa Nam mkha, we read about her ambivalent nature:

sTong rgyung mThu chen, the holder of the lineage [of sPe bon Thog rtse] obtained realisation at the female Lake of Riches gNam mtsho. Dressed as a Brahmin, he had a dark-brown complexion and a wrathful visage. His hair was in a top knot. On his body he wore bone ornaments. In his right hand he held a razor-sharp *shang lang* (= sword in Zhang zhung language) and in his left, a *sbar shad* (a claw-like weapon). He stood in an animated and regal fashion. His consort was the Queen of the Lake who has a bright blue complexion and tiny turquoise braids. She dresses in a *go zu* (a cloak which expands when the wearer is under attack) made of the cloth of aquatic wool. With her right hand she offers a shell full of nectar and with her left hand a snake skull full of blood. His [sTong rgyung mThu chen] ordinary accomplishments were that he could throw *nyung thun* (a powerful weapon consisting of tantrically empowered mustard seeds) [in order to] expel enemies and obstructions, wrap gNam mtsho in his lap with his clothes and he had a *ri zor* (magical bomb in the form of a mountain), which he could throw. (*Rig 'dzin rig pa'i thugs rgyud*, folio No. 205.)

At gNam mtsho, forms of Bon were inextricably tied to the pastoral and hunting culture. This is demonstrated in paintings of animal subjects depicted in a religious or

mythological attitude. Two fine examples found at ICE do feature triads of animals (apparently of eagle, wild yak and wild ass; wild yak, cervid and an eagle-like figure); creatures that are closely tied with the indigenous pantheon (Bellezza 1997a: 245-6). Animals such as the yak and deer had epiphanic forms as sacred mountains and ancestral figures, as well as demonic variants. The cultural prominence of these animals is reflected in their great proliferation in the rock art of the Byang thang. Derived in part from Neolithic precedents, early Bon, as represented in gNam mtsho rock paintings, welded people, animals and topography into a world order (= existence/*srid pa*) whose legacy is still discernible in the contemporary culture of the 'brog pa.

Early Bon mythology and ritual practices have modern counterparts in the culture of the Byang thang. A portion of the ancient, environment-based pantheon is still intact despite 1200 years of Buddhist dominance. Perhaps more importantly, some of the ritual means used in early Bon to placate and worship this pantheon are present in modern Tibetan culture. The most celebrated of these is the *lha bsangs*, the use of aromatic substances to purify deities which have become defiled through the activities of humans. Also popular are ancient fortune-bestowing rites (*g.yang gugs*) and exorcising rites (*glud*) of various kinds. The construction of *la brtse* and *rtan khar*, stone structures used in the worship of environment-based deities, is still a popular practice. The vase (*bum pa*), ritual mirror (*me long*), arrow (*mda'*) and cymbals (*gshang*), four important ritual implements in early Bon, are popular with modern-day practitioners, and to some extent are used in the same fashion as in pre-Buddhist times. The continuity in religious culture is also visible in the cave paintings of gNam mtsho where ancient motifs (horns, swastikas and sacred animals) continued to be painted well into the Buddhist period.

The paintings

The paintings herein described are organised according to geographical location and subject content. We will begin the survey from bKra shis do (Good Luck Headland), the ten-kilometre-long peninsula on the south-east side of gNam mtsho. At the tip of the headland of bKra shis do are two low-lying ranges of hills appropriately called Chung (small) and Chen (large). The base of these ranges, which stretches for nearly ten kilometres in length, terminates in colourful limestone escarpments. In these escarpments are many caves which are integral to the sacred geography of the region. Rock paintings occur in about thirty of these caves, rockshelters and overhangs. They are primarily executed in various shades of red ochre (iron oxides and hydroxides), which is believed to come from a small mine at bKra shis do and is called rDo rje Phag mo'i rakta (Blood of the Thunderbolt Sow Goddess) (Bellezza 1997a: 210-1, 227-8). Some paintings were also rendered in a black pigment locally called 'black earth' (charcoal or manganese?).

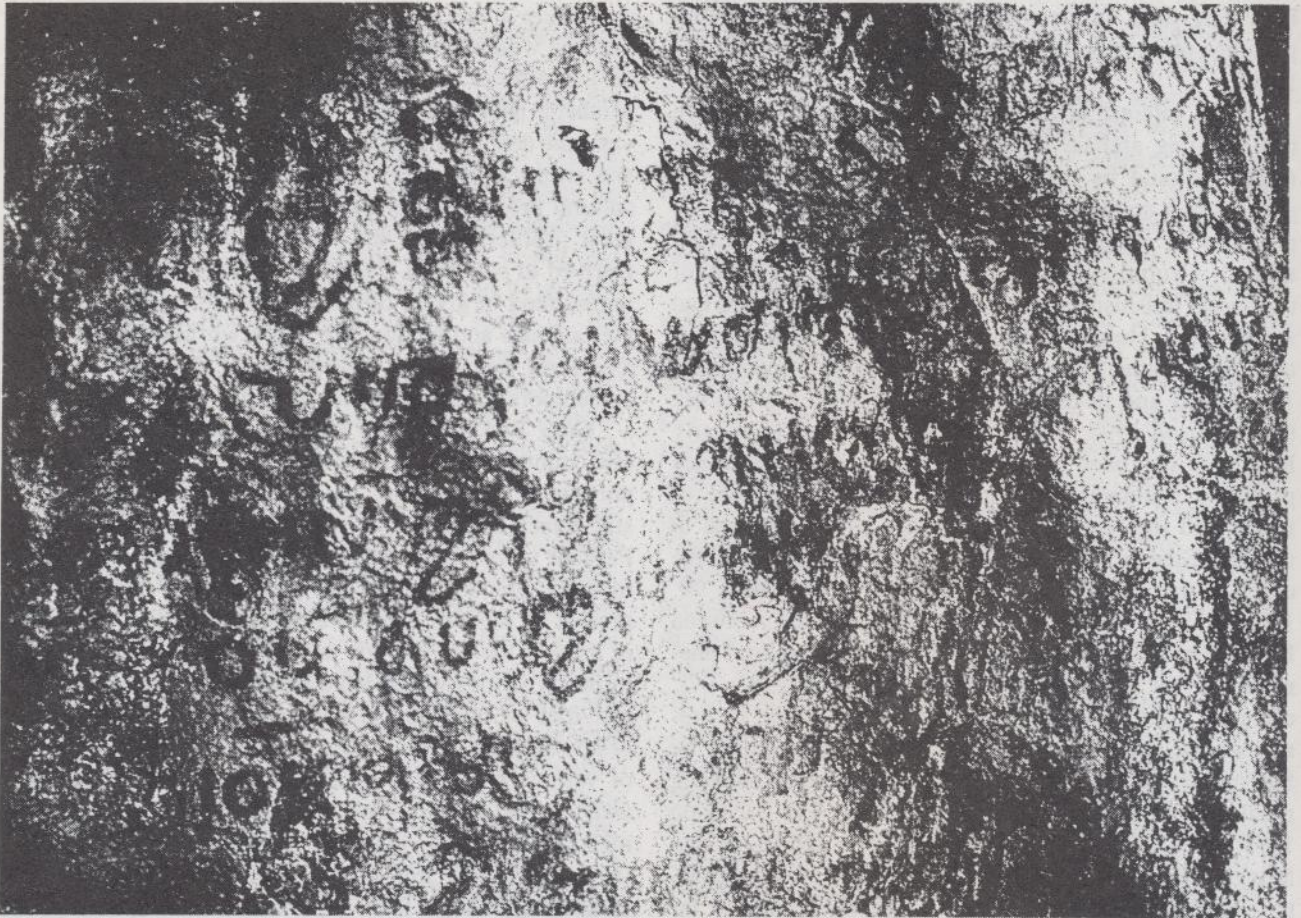


Figure 3. *bKra shis rtags brygad phug*, Tibetan inscription.

1. *bKra shis do chung*

One of the finest examples of the transition from 'aboriginal religion' to the great epoch of Bon is found in a cave just east of *bKra shis rtags brygad phug* (Cave of the Eight Auspicious Symbols). It consists of an archaic-style ungulate painted in black with a red ochre Bon *g.yung drung* (counter-clockwise swastika) superimposed upon it (Bellezza 1997a: 182).² The *g.yung drung* (swastika) in Tibet long predates the introduction of Buddhism. It is the most important cosmological and doctrinal symbol in Bon. Its origins can be traced to the earliest rock paintings and petroglyphs and it is common throughout the Byang thang.

In the *bKra shis rtags brygad phug* there is a superb array of Bon motifs, many of which appear to date to Tibet's Imperial period³. These include four discernible

mchod rten (*stupa* in Sanskrit)⁴, closely associated with an inscription written in archaic Tibetan script. The inscription and *mchod rten* were painted in the same colour red ochre paint and display similar wear characteristics. Due to these physical similarities, and design elements of the *mchod rten* and letters, they can most likely be attributed to the Imperial period. Unfortunately, the inscription is illegible because of advanced levels of wear and exfoliation, making a close examination of orthography and content impossible (Fig. 3). Due to this degradation the *mchod rten* and inscription are only faintly visible and this probably explains why they do not seem to have been previously documented.

The largest *mchod rten* was elaborately composed

² For an assessment of the meaning and significance of the *g.yung drung* see Bellezza (1997a: 211, 228-30). For other examples in rock art see Suolang Wangdui (1994: Nos 28, 52, 80, 93, 114, 116, 123, 159, 161, 170, 211, 225), Bellezza (1997a: 182, 200, 213, 217, 244). The *g.yung drung* is also found in the petroglyphs of the Chinese steppe provinces (Tang Huisheng 1993: 87, 88) and is represented in petroglyphs of the Qinghai plateau (Tang Huisheng 1989). For a global historical perspective on this important symbol see Sharma (1990: 60-72).

³ It has been suggested that petroglyphs found on the Qinghai plateau at

Lushan Hill, Yeniu valley, Huaitoutala and Shebuqi were painted during the Imperial period struggle between Bon and Buddhism (Tang Huisheng 1989: 10). While this appears to be the case, the author provides no graphic examples of this religious conflict.

⁴ Simply put, the *mchod rten* or *stupa* is a Bon and Buddhist monument representing the enlightened nature of gShen rab/Buddha. There is a variety of types of *mchod rten*. The Bon po claim to have acquired the *mchod rten* long before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th century. In its earliest form the Bon *mchod rten* may be related to cairns (*la brtse*) and another class of primitive monuments called *bya dong*. For general information on the symbolism and design of the Bon *mchod rten* consult Tenzin Namdag (1995: 159) and Menyag (1998).

and is 76 cm in height (Fig. 4). In one tier of the base two *g.yung drung* were painted and flanking the structure are three more *g.yung drung*. The Bon identity of the *mchod rten* is established by these counter-clockwise swastika. The three-pronged finale which resembles the *bya ru bya gri* (the horns of the bird and the sword of the bird) is also a Bon iconographic feature. The bird referred to here is the *khyung*, the popular Bon eagle deity, and the horns and sword of the *khyung* are symbols of its unrivalled sovereignty. While the sword between the horns is not clearly depicted, the orb-like structure (*tog*) it rests on is prominently shown; thus the *mchod rten* differs somewhat from the modern iconography of the *bya ru bya gri*. The curvilinear structures flanking the spire (*'khor lo*) of the *mchod rten* represent banners.

water seeping down the cave wall and therefore cannot be positively identified as a Bon motif. The fourth intact *mchod rten* in bKra shis rtags bryad phug is again of an entirely different style (Bellezza 1997a: 181).



Figure 4. bKra shis rtags bryad phug, Bon *mchod rten*.

In close proximity is another Bon *mchod rten* painted in an entirely different style which is 54 cm in height (Fig. 5). The prominent rectangular base is segmented by many horizontal lines. Its pyramidal spire is also surmounted by a finale related to the *bya ru bya gri* which confirms its identity as a Bon monument. Similar-shaped *mchod rten* are still used in Bon tantric initiations. Also in close proximity is another *mchod rten* painted in an alternative style, 42 cm in height (Fig. 6). Much of this painting has undergone damage caused by



Figure 5. bKra shis rtags bryad phug, Bon *mchod rten*.



Figure 6. bKra shis rtags bryad phug, Bon *mchod rten*.



Figure 7. *bKra shis rtags bryad phug*, inscription in unusual script.

Stupa-s of the same general time frame and design have been found carved on boulders in Chilas, Indus Kohistan, Pakistan (for the legendary associations of the Bon religion in northern Pakistan, see Hoffman 1969). These include specimens with the same type of *bya ru bya gri* as the *bKra shis rtags bryad phug mchod rten*. These have been described by one researcher as Bon 'orb' and 'two projections' (Jettmar 1985: 767-8). Reportedly these *stupa-s* of Kohistan represent elaborate mountain symbols and may have been influenced by stone altars and menhirs which existed in the region at least until 1958 (Jettmar 1985: 769-70). Some of the *stupa-s* of Chilas with their slender elongated forms resemble those found in Gandhara (Thewalt 1985: 779). Three others, however, are closely related to Bon *mchod rten* (Thewalt 1985: 792, 794). The *bya ru bya gri* of these three petroglyphs has been designated as a *trisula* (trident) by Thewalt (1985: 792) but there appears to be no connection between the *mchod rten* and *Sivaism*. Evidence suggests that parts of northern Pakistan (Bru sha) formed a tributary state of the Bon kingdom of Zhang zhung before the Tibetan conquest in the 8th century. According to Bon tradition, gNam mtsho was also part of Zhang zhung, representing an eastern territorial extension of the kingdom. What appear to be Imperial period *mchod rten* engraved on rocks were discovered in Ladakh (La dwags) on the 1935 Tucci expedition to the region and bear similarities with the *mchod rten* in *bKra shis rtags bryad phug*. The style of the Ladakh *mchod rten* and associated inscriptions (with their military titles, orthographic characteristics, and associated references in the Tun-huang manuscripts) can be attributed to the Imperial period (Orofino 1990: 177-8). The finale of some of these *mchod rten* appear to be Bon in style and

may be related to the conquest of Zhang zhung during the westward Tibetan military expansion which reached Ladakh in the 8th century (cf. Orofino 1990: 173-4). At that time it is possible that Bon in western Tibet adopted Buddhist elements through contacts with Buddhist centres in Kashmir, Swat, Gilgit and Zahor (cf. Orofino 1990: 174). An excellent source of early *mchod rten* designs (both Bon and Buddhist) is found in the talismanic *thog lcags*. Some of these were produced in the Imperial era and bear structural similarities to the paintings of *mchod rten* in *bKra shis rtags bryad phug* (cf. Bellezza 1998 for a survey of *thog lcags* which includes photographs of about 450 specimens).

On other panels of the *bKra shis rtags bryad phug* are what appear to be the vestiges of *mchod rten* but very little of them remains. They have been painted over by Buddhist *ma ni* and *vajra mantra-s* in red ochre. Also superimposed on what may have been *mchod rten* are Bon *g.yung drung* and illegible inscriptions in *dbu med* script (headless letters) drawn in a black pigment.

A highly unusual inscription is also found in *bKra shis rtags bryad phug* which, given its apparent association with the other paintings, might also date to the Imperial period (Fig. 7). It contains about ten characters written in a script related to Tibetan but whose letters are modified beyond recognised calligraphic conventions. Although it is fairly legible it is not fully readable due to the unusual formation of the letters. There appear to be two possibilities regarding its identification: it either represents a heretofore unknown Tibetan calligraphy, or it is a type of *smar yig*, the pre-Buddhist script reputedly used in Zhang zhung. As each of these characters are fundamentally different from recognised Tibetan styles of writing it is very unlikely that they are

the work of an inexperienced scribe. Several of the letters resemble those found in two other unusual inscriptions (Figs 8 and 9).

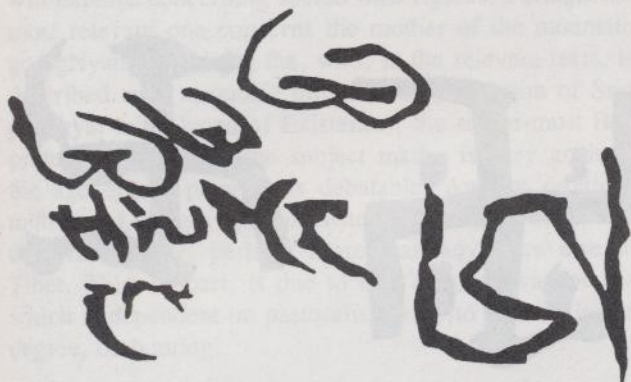


Figure 8. *kLu khang*, fourth ancillary chamber, inscription in unusual script.

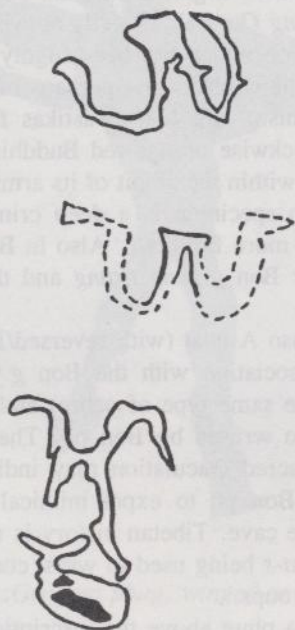


Figure 9. *Gangs lung*, *Dang ra g.yu mtsho*, carved inscription in unusual script.

The two inscriptions in question, one painted and one engraved, have been documented (Bellezza 1997b). The painted inscription is found in the fourth ancillary chamber of the *kLu khang*, *bKra shis do chung*, and the engraved inscription is located below the village of *Gangs lung*, *Dang ra g.yu mtsho* (*Nyi ma county*). These inscriptions appear to have been written by *Bon po* in the Imperial period or its aftermath. They have not been satisfactorily deciphered.

Another series of unusual letters is found in the *kLu khang*, *bKra shis do chen* (Bellezza 1997b), not previously published (Figs 10 and 10a). These letters are found inside a segmented box on which stands an an-

thropomorph. To the right of this composition '*kun tu bzang yen*' (reference to the Primordial Buddha) was written in a crude manner in the same type and colour of red ochre. I had earlier misread this inscription as '*kun la bzang yen*' (Bellezza 1997a: 215; Bellezza 1997b: 398) and stated that the inscription was 'not an integral part of the other paintings ...' when in fact further observation showed that it is.



Figure 10. *kLu khang*, fourth ancillary chamber, unusual lettering inside segmented box.

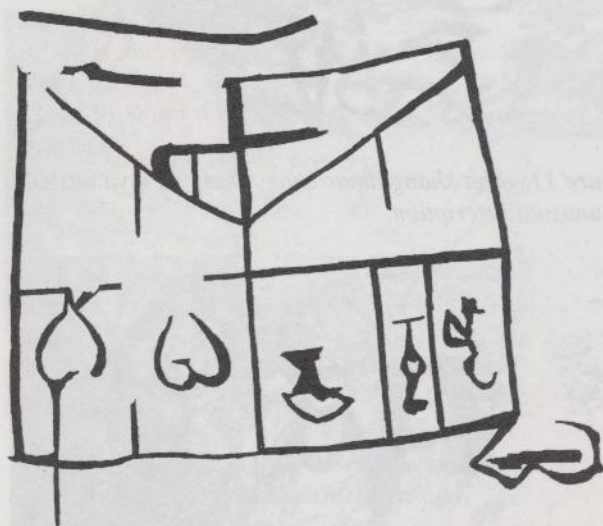


Figure 10a. *kLu khang*, fourth ancillary chamber, partial reconstruction of Figure 10.

This indicates that these inscriptions form an integral theme. In the lower left hand side of the box are two letters which look like a modified *dbu med* letter A. In the same row, to the right, are what appear to be three consonants. Above these figures are what might be other letters/symbols but they are too damaged to identify.

Also of special note is an inscription of indeterminate age, written in an orange ochre and a white pigment, found by me in November 1997 on the cliff face below the ruined *Bon temple* of *Lha khang dmar chag*, *Da rog mtsho* ('*Brong pa county*) (Fig. 11). Save for the letter A at the bottom of the inscription it has not been deciphered. The rest of the inscription is composed of unre-

cognisable symbols. In the upper right hand corner is a rectangle containing a fairly complex array of lines which is reminiscent of designs found on Tibetan seals. While the Da rog mtsho inscription may be related to the Zhang zhung *smar yig*, its origins could also lie in the ancient Bon *lde'u* tradition of riddles and secret codes. The proximity of the inscription to the Bon temple and its rendering in the same types of pigments as the paintings found in Lha khang dmar chag (probably established c. A.D. 1000) suggest a connection. Progress in identifying these unusual series of inscriptions would be stimulated by further discovery. In 1998, reports surfaced in the Chinese media that Chinese archaeologists discovered Zhang zhung writing in extreme western Tibet. Hopefully this discovery is published soon.



Figure 11. Lha khang dmar chag, Dang ra g.yu mtsho, unusual inscription.



Figure 12. Cave of Bon, 'Bon kyi phug pa'.

In another cave of bKra shis do chung called Bon po phug by the local herders (Cave of the Bon po) are several Bon motifs. The most graphic of these is an inscription in ordinary *dbu can* (letters with heads) announcing the name of the cave 'Bon kyi phug pa' (Cave of Bon) (Fig. 12). This inscription seems to have been modified whereby the vowel sign (*sna ro*) above the B in Bon was

partially erased so that it reads; 'Ban kyi phug pa' (Cave of the Buddhists). Moreover, the vowel sign (*shabs kyu*) under the ph in phug pa seems to have been tampered with in order for it to read; 'phag pa' (pig).

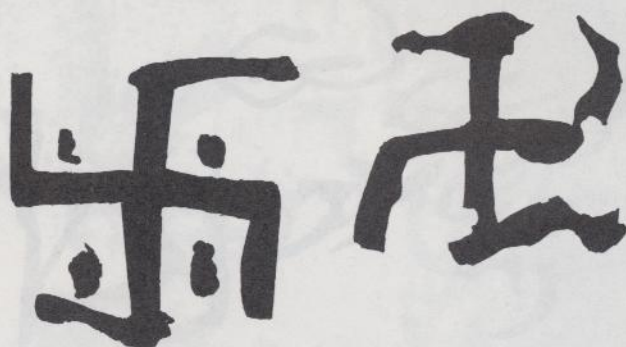


Figure 13. Cave of Bon, Bon and Buddhist swastikas.

Also in Bon po phug is the Bon *mantra* directed to the Deity of Boundless Light, gShen lha od dkar, 'A A dkar sa le od A yang Om du'. Directly above this prayer is another inscription which has been highly effaced. A trenchant sign of the contact, and perhaps of the rivalry of Bon and Buddhism, are two swastikas face to face (Fig. 13). The clockwise orange-red Buddhist specimen includes four dots within the ambit of its arms, an Indian tradition. The Bon specimen is a deep crimson colour and is drawn with more fluidity⁵. Also in Bon po phug are a couple other Bon *g.yung drung* and the syllables 'bso A phat'.

The *mantra-s* bso A phat (with reversed/Indian letter t) are in close association with the Bon *g.yung drung* (and made with the same type of ochre) and, therefore, were probably also written by Bon po. The exorcising qualities of this sacred ejaculation may indicate that it was used by the Bon po to expel inimical (Buddhist) influences from the cave. Tibetan history is replete with examples of *mantra-s* being used to wrest control of territory from rival groups.

In the sGrol ma phug above the inscription invoking the *lha 'dre*, elemental spirits of the sky and earth (Bellezza 1997a: 186-7), are the Bon *mantra-s* 'A Om' *Hum ra za*' (each of the five syllables represents the five human attributes in their purified condition) and 'bso A phat', the latter with a Bon (counter-clockwise) *g.yung drung* scrawled in the same hand.

Also in the sGrol ma phug is the first of several paintings we will survey, depicting 'winged' anthropomorphic figures (Fig. 14). Painted using a black pigment, this figure features outstretched 'wings', a round head and human-like body and legs. This bird-human

⁵ While it seems that the two *g.yung drung* were created using different coloured pigments, it must also be kept in mind that as red ochre applications age they darken. It is known that ochre ages consistently towards a deep red colour, particularly in the hot dry climates of deserts (Chakravarty and Bednarik 1996: 8).

figure exhibits a high degree of exfoliation through the aging process and appears to have been painted over a red ochre composition now reduced to a nebulous mass of paint. There are a number of cultural attributions we will explore concerning sacred bird figures. Perhaps the most relevant one concerns the mother of the mountain god gNyan chen thang lha, who, in the relevant texts, is described as a turquoise bird and an emanation of Srid pai rgyal mo (Queen of Existence), the senior-most Bon protectress⁶. While the subject matter is very ancient, the age of the painting is debatable. Ancient religious motifs and themes have persisted in 'brog pa culture to the present day, perhaps more than anywhere else in Tibet. This, in part, is due to the 'brog pa way of life which is dependent on pastoralism and, to a much lesser degree, on hunting.

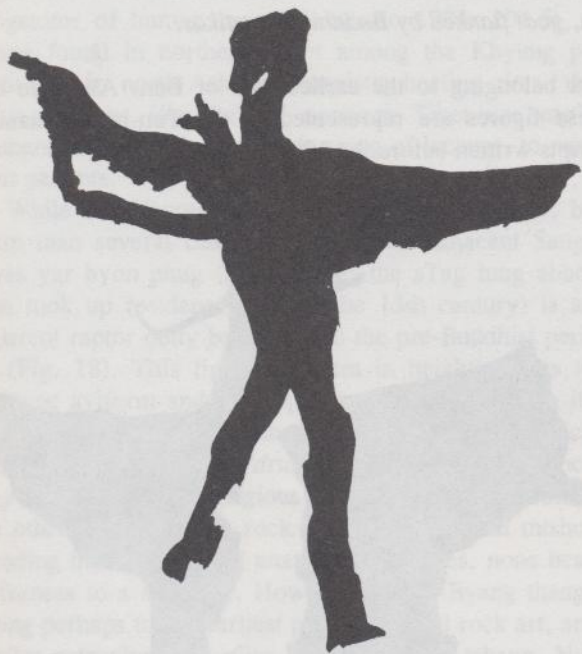


Figure 14. *sGrol ma phug*, winged anthropomorph.

⁶ gNyan chen thang lha, located in the Trans-Himalaya range, is the most important mountain in central Tibet and the consort of gNam mtsho. In an ancient tale (probably the remnant of a cosmogonic myth), a *klu mo* (female serpent deity of the underworld) bestowed gNyan chen thang lha and gNam mtsho, the sources of great treasures, on human beings so that they could flourish. The great lake and mountain coupled produced essential resources for the development of human society. Their progeny included A mdo gro gad, a mountain god, who gave wild and domesticated animals to the first 'brog pa, thus becoming their prime benefactor. A daughter sired by the mountain and lake dyad, A dar tsha mtsho, a lake goddess, gave the first humans soda and salt and became the protectress and patroness of salt. This tale was kindly shared with me by bSam sgrub (aged 77), a renowned *sgrung pa* (bard) in Lhasa, in October 1997, while he was in hospital recovering from a broken arm. In Buddhist texts the mother of gNyan chen thang lha is depicted as a one-winged bird. This disfigurement appears to have been a deliberate attempt to diminish the importance of this ancient zoomorphic deity. To my knowledge, there is no rock art on the Byang thang depicting one-winged birds

In the middle of *sGrol ma phug*, on the smoothest and most regular wall of the cave, is an ancient 'celestial burial scene' featuring a bird-like deity leading a human figure (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 180; Bellezza 1997a: 184-5, 222-3). This composition dating from the pre-Buddhist period is important to our knowledge of ancient Tibetan religious practices. Again, it features a raptor in a central role in the mytho-religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the region.

2. *bKra shis do chen*

Just east of the *bKra shis do chung* headland is the larger *bKra shis do chen* range. In a rockshelter I refer to as the 'eastern pyramidal nook' are many paintings well within access of the area's burgeoning tourist trade. Near the bottom of the nook, a carnivorous animal skulks below a Bon *g.yung drung* (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 149-50; Bellezza 1997a: 200). This painting, like most of the others in the shelter, may not be more than a few centuries old but the composition represented here has its antecedents in Metal Age petroglyphs and paintings. An early example is a petroglyph at Shar tshang (Nyi ma county) of a stag prancing below a Bon *g.yung drung* which is topped by a tear drop-shaped design (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 116).



Figure 15. *Brag bying gur phug*, ungulate in bi-triangular style and Buddhist swastika.

A similar composition is found in the west chamber of *Brag bying gur phug*, *bKra shis do chen*, depicting a 'yak' drawn in the bi-triangular style below a large Buddhist (clockwise) *g.yung drung* (Fig. 15). This depiction was drawn using a piece of ochre as a crayon and might be not more than two or three centuries old. Although the theme is ancient, the drawing was applied subsequent to the formation of calcareous precipitates on the cave wall. This physical evidence and the style of painting, which is reminiscent of modern 'brog pa paintings, indicates that it was drawn fairly recently. At Lo gсар, the Tibetan New Year festival, the herders of the Byang thang draw animals within the aegis of the *g.yung drung* as talismanic devices to protect the flocks (Fig. 16). Except in Bon po enclaves, these swastikas are normally oriented in a clockwise direction.



Figure 16. Modern brog pa painting on cloth, goat flanked by Buddhist swastikas.

The so-called bi-triangular style of rendering the bodies of ungulates is a design feature that Byang thang art has in common with that of central Asia. For example, petroglyphs of 'goats' in different styles including the bi-triangular style, attributed to the Bronze Age and early Iron Age, are found in Namagut, Badakshan (Sher and Garyaeva 1996: 108). The bi-triangular style typical of inner Asia is found in Indus Kohistan, from both early (Bronze Age) and late periods (to at least 10th century A.D.) (Jettmar 1985: 755), which also appears to be the case for the Byang thang. Good examples of animals painted in the bi-triangular style in the Byang thang include an ungulate in red ochre, in rDo dmar township, Ru thog county (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 85), and a 16-cm-long 'yak' drawn in black found in the cave adjacent to bKra shis rtags brgyad phug, bKra shis do chung. Another example, in red ochre, is found in the 'Phrang lam, bKra shis do chung. The animal, probably a yak, is situated below a purposefully effaced Bon mantra.

At ICe do, on the west side of gNam mtsho, we find a painting from an early phase depicting a primitive *g.yung drung* sandwiched between a sun and crescent moon with a pair of horsemen in close proximity (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 170; Bellezza 1997a: 244). The association of the *g.yung drung* with animals and people is related to its ancient cosmological and cosmogonic functions. To this day in Bon, we commonly hear the expression, '*tshe yi g.yung drung*' (swastika of life).

At the very top of the eastern nook is a horned *khyung* (17.5 cm in height) which hovers above the other paintings in the niche (Fig. 17). It appears to be carrying out its traditional role of guardian by watching over the other figures in the paintings. The *khyung*, Tibet's native eagle deity, appears in the rock art of the Byang thang from the very earliest period. So important was this deified animal that it is believed the name of the kingdom of Zhang zhung was etymologically derived from it (Norbu 1995: xvi; Bellezza 1997a: 80). Along with the horned *khyung* are the *bya rgod* and *thang dkar*, two other rap-

tors belonging to the earliest tier of Bon. All three of these figures are represented in the Tun-huang manuscripts written before the 10th century A.D.



Figure 17. Eastern Pyramidal Nook, horned *khyung*.

The *khyung* and its relatives are anachronisms which appear to have had their origins in the 'aboriginal period', and which still form a strong part of both doctrinal and folk patterns of belief (cf. Bellezza 1997a: 80-3 for a review of the role of the *khyung* in Tibetan culture). Eagles are also very important in the cultures and rock art of other regions of central and northern Asia. For example in Trans-Baikal petroglyphs, many 'eagles' and 'falcons' are depicted (Martynov 1991: 33, 34). The functional parallels of the eagle and its presumed depiction in rock art in Tibetan and other Asian cultures might be evidence for cultural commonalities originating in the

Stone Age and Metal Age. This possible cultural linkage involves common religious and mythological themes surrounding eagles and other raptors which include (1) role as ancestral figure, (2) divine manifestations, (3) use of feathers in healing and fortune-bestowing rituals, and (4) beliefs concerning the afterlife. According to legend, early Bon priests wore horns on their heads, representing the *khyung*. In Scythian burials, eagle designs are found on top of the head, crown and cap (Jacobson 1993: 71-76). The worship of the eagle is one of the common denominators linking diverse tribes in Siberia and Mongolia and has parallels in northern Tibet. Birds in northern Asia are associated with the upper sphere of a tripartite world and their general mythological placement is as divine beings or emissaries of the world of the spirits or dead (Martynov 1991: 34-5), myth themes which are also found in Tibet. In the Buryat myth of origins, the eagle was sent from the celestial realm to become the progenitor of human race (Massenzio 1984: 204-5), a theme found in northern Tibet among the Khyung po clans. As in north-Asian shamanistic healing rites, the spirit-mediums (*lha ba*) of northern Tibet use eagle feathers, accompanied by the burning of incense, to cure their patients.

While the *khyung* in the eastern niche may not be more than several centuries old, in the adjacent Sangs rgyas yar byon phug (named after the sTag lung abbot who took up residence here in the 13th century) is an apparent raptor deity belonging to the pre-Buddhist period (Fig. 18). This figure (3.5 cm in height) seems to combine aviform and anthropomorphic elements in its design, as well as resembling a swastika. Given the rich symbolism of the *g.yung drung* in Bon this convergence may have had strong religious overtones. Although there are other therianthrope rock paintings at gNam mtsho, blending human and bird anatomical features, none bear a likeness to a swastika. However, in the Byang thang, dating perhaps to the earliest period of local rock art, are similar petroglyphs at rGya gling and Shar tshang, Nyi ma county (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 117, 149). The rGya gling bird was carved in association with plants, the sun, the moon and a swastika. The Shar tshang petroglyph depicts the bird suspended above an anthropomorph with five protuberances issuing from the top of his head. His right arm is held upright while his left is directed towards several objects on the ground. Barring undue speculation, little can be said of this apparent mythological and or ritual scene.



Figure 18.
Sangs rgyas yar byon phug,
archaic 'bird' figure.

A fine example of petroglyph figures that combine bird and human features is located at mTha' kham pa in the Byang thang (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 62). The figure on the left seems to have bird feathers on his head and body while the beak of the figure on the right is clearly rendered in the petroglyph. Costumes consisting of bird feathers are attested to for both early Bon adepts and deities. For example, the *Rigs 'dzin rig pai thugs rgyud* (folio No. 204) records that the adept sPe bon thog rtse wore a robe (*thul ba*) of feathers. In the manuscript *Dang ra'i bsang mchod bzhugs pa dbu'i gzigs phyogs legs par bzhugs*, a rediscovered invocational text for the Dang ra g.yu mtsho sisterhood of lake goddesses (folio 2a), the goddess sKre de chen mo ral cig ma wears a robe of vulture feathers.

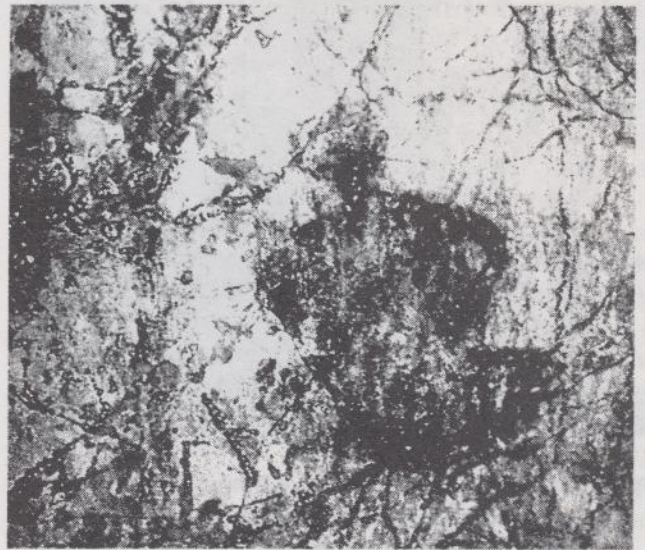


Figure 19. East chamber of Brag bying gur phug,
seated figure with 'headdress' or 'hair bun'.

Anthropomorphs with protuberances on their heads are also found in the paintings of gNam mtsho. In the east chamber of Brag bying gur phug (Cave of the Rock Felt Tent), bKra shis do chen, are two such figures (Figs 19 and 20). Positive identification of these figures, especially Figure 19, is made difficult by the degradation of the paintings. Anthropomorphs with protuberances on their heads can be found in the petroglyphs of Lu ring la kha and mTha' kham pa, Ru thog county (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 12, 13, 76). Sitting in the manner of religious masters, they either sport horns (*rwa co*) on top of their heads or prominent hair knots (*thor gtsug*), both of which are attested to in Bon culture. Another ancient decoration for the top of the head were the feathers of raptors. An example of this seems to appear on hunters on horseback belonging to the early phase of painting in lCe do phug, on the west side of gNam mtsho (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 168, 170; Bellezza 1997a: 244). This ancient custom has survived to the present day in the Byang thang. In gZhung pa ma mtshan, dGe rgyas county, men on horseback bearing gifts for the god of

the locale (Rol pa skya bdun) during a communal festival held near the end of summer (gZhung pa sde bsang rta bgyud) wear white *thang dkar* (lammergeier vulture) feathers on their heads.



Figure 20. East chamber of Brag bying gur phug, seated figure with 'headdress' or 'hair bun'.

Tentatively, I am attributing these two figures to the pre-Buddhist period. The subject matter, advanced deterioration of the paint and the formation of mineral accretions over the paintings seem to warrant such an attribution. Another example of a figure with something on its head is found in sTag lung phug, bKra shis do chen. This image appears to consist of a mounted anthropomorphic figure, however, identification is hampered by considerable wear and damage to the painting (Fig. 21). The figure's significant level of paint residue degradation and the archaic depiction (not unlike early deities found on Tibetan metallic amulets) suggest a pre-Buddhist antiquity. Yet another example is found in the sGrol ma phug, bKra shis do chung, and consists of an archaic figure astride a 'yak'. Two distinctive horn-like extensions are visible on the top of the triangular-shaped head of the rider (Fig. 22).

A yak-headed Bon deity, Ge khod, is believed to have been an important god in the pre-Buddhist Byang thang. Elemental spirits such as the gods of the locale are said to manifest as yaks, both male and female. Mongolian petroglyphs from Karakol and the Chuluut and Chuya rivers interpreted as horned and feathered figures have been associated with the great goddess figures spanning central Asia and the Middle East. Like the

petroglyphs, these ancient goddesses frequently had crowns of horns or feathers (Jacobson 1993: 224-7). While I have not yet found direct evidence to link Bon horned and feathered headdresses to the Avestan protectress of cattle, Anahita, or to any of the other great goddesses such as the Scythian Tabiti, cultural interactions between early Bon and Indo-European cultures are indicated. Among the most convincing evidence for linkage is a connection apparently found in an Indo-European linguistic substrate of the Tibetan language (Walter and Beckwith 1997). In her most primitive form as creatrix and progenitrix, the lake goddess gNam mtsho possesses characteristics attributed to great goddess figures.



Figure 21. sTag lung phug, 'mounted figure'.



Figure 22. sGrol ma phug, horned anthropomorph on 'riding yak'.

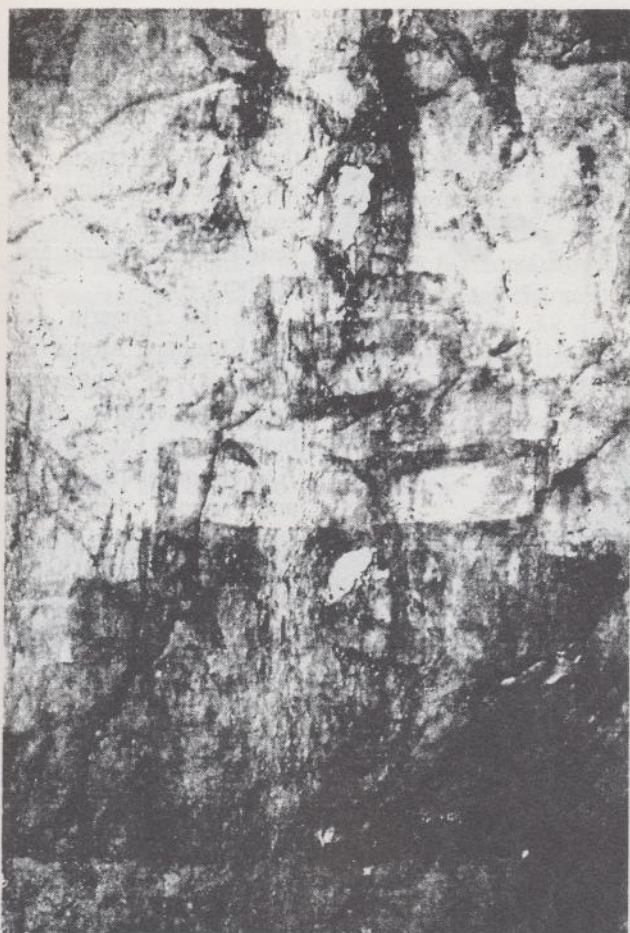


Figure 23. West chamber of Brag bying gur phug, *mchod rten*. Note the dabs of butter on the painting.

According to Bon scriptures, early adepts of the religion could transform themselves into animals. For example, the Bon patron and King of Tibet, Mu khri btsan po, and his four consorts could manifest in the intermediate realm (on earth) as dragons, *khyung* and lions (both dragons and *khyung* have horns) (*Rig 'dzin rig pa'i thugs rgyud*, folio No. 200). Another early Bon saint, sTag ber li ber, upon his death at 360 years of age, is said to have turned into a *khyung* near the top of the sacred mountain Ti se and to have disappeared into space (*Rig 'dzin rig pa'i thugs rgyud*, folio No. 201). Furthermore, according to Bon history, a Zhang zhung dynasty of eighteen kings possessed a royal emblem (worn on the head) consisting of the horns of the *khyung* made of various precious materials (cf. Norbu 1989: 20-2).

The sacred status of horns, caprids and bovids is well documented in the material culture of pre-Buddhist Tibet. Among early designs in *thog lcags* ('primordial metal'), the metallic talismans of Tibet, are those representing the horns of the *Pseudois nayaur* (blue sheep/*rna*) and *Ovis ammon hodgsoni* (argali/*gnyan*). Talismans fashioned in the shape of sheep and yak heads are also well known. Horns of wild ungulates constitute important offerings to the *yul lha* (gods of the locale) which are thought to own these animals. The horns of

the blue sheep are believed to have been used as ritual implements, and the Zhang zhung sage sTong rgyung is often shown holding a blue sheep horn with a flame issuing from it. In a Bon history of the oral transmission of the rDzogs chen tradition (*Bon ma nub pai gan tshigs*) it records that in one instance, the saint sNang bzher lod po manifested from a blue sheep horn made of white crystal.

Likewise, in central and northern Asia, horns were used as offerings to mountain spirits and as magical implements. Shamans' hats with horns or antlers have been widely used since ancient times by most Siberian peoples. Antlered headgears used by Nanai shamans symbolised the relationship between the shaman and his ancestor spirit (Smoljak 1984: 247).

In the west chamber of Brag bying gur phug are three crudely painted *mchod rten*, one of which measures 43 cm in height (Fig. 23). The Om of a six-syllable Buddhist *ma ni mantra* was painted over the top of this specimen. The light-coloured blobs in the photograph are made of butter. They are dabbed on the rock paintings by pilgrims who worship them as magical manifestations. This practice, however, damages the paintings. I have not determined whether these *mchod rten* were painted by Bon po or Buddhists. Another composition which so far resists identification as Bon or Buddhist (although I suspect it was painted by Bon po) features a figure prostrating to an idol under the gaze of a Lamaist figure with outstretched arms and a conical hat (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 204; Bellezza 1997a: 206). An unmistakably Bon symbol is that of a boldly painted *g.yung drung* also found in the west chamber of the cave (Fig. 24), one of dozens of counter-clockwise swastikas found at gNam mtsho.

Figure 24. West chamber of Brag bying gur phug, *Bon g.yung drung*.



Among the most enigmatic paintings are characters scrawled inside and outside of a rectangle located in the rear of the west chamber of Brag bying phug (Fig. 25). It is in close proximity to what I referred to as 'Chinese style' paintings and Chinese ideograms (Bellezza 1997a: 208-10). However, after further inquiry, I now believe that these paintings and inscriptions were made by the Altaic Khitans or Jurchens⁷.

⁷ See Suolang Wangdui (1994: No. 200) for an example of what I believe to be a Tungusic language inscription. This subject is beyond the scope of the present paper and will be taken up at a later date. It will suffice to state that two dynasties are involved: the Liao dynasty of the Khitans established in the early 10th century and continuing until 1125, and the Jin dynasty of the Jurchens which existed from A.D. 1115-1234. For general information on the Khitans see Twitchett and Tietze (1994), and for the Jurchen see Francke (1994). For information on the Khitan script refer to Qinggeertai et al. (1985), and for the Jurchen script see Jin Qizong (1984).



Figure 25. West chamber of Brag bying gur phug, characters probably related to adjacent Tungusic language inscription.

At the eastern extremity of bKra shis do chen is a group of clefts and shallow caves in the escarpment known as Brag dkar (White Cliff). At two different places at Brag dkar are archaic ornitho-therianthropic figures (Fig. 26).

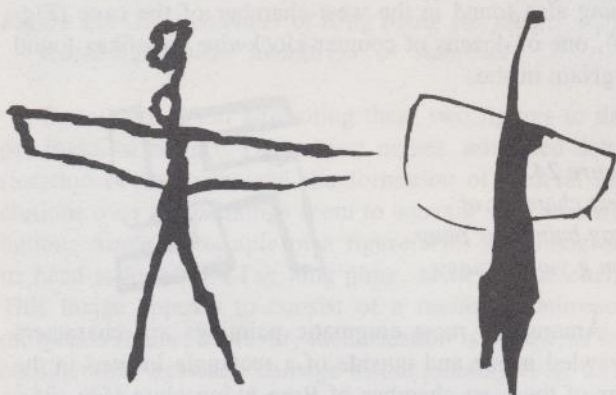


Figure 26. Brag dkar, ornitho-therianthropes.

In the typical fashion of depicting raptors in the Byang thang, they stand with outstretched wings. They exhibit disproportionately small heads, long thin necks, rectangular wings and elongated bodies and legs emblematic of great antiquity. Although stylistic and physical characteristics seem to indicate that these compositions belong to the 'aboriginal period', as we have seen, early Bon adepts (*gshen po* and *dpon sas*) had the ability to transform themselves into the *khyung*. The transformation of humans into animals (bestiovestism) appears to be a cultural phenomenon of great antiquity and persistence. A seminal theme among lake and mountain deities in

Tibet is their ability to take the guise of various animals by projecting their souls (*bla*) into them. Bestiovestism is also well documented among a large variety of peoples from central and northern Asia.

In Ikh Tengerin Am and Khachurt, Mongolia, paintings of anthropomorphic figures attributed to the Late Bronze Age are not unlike eagles and falcons with outstretched wings (Marty-nov 1991: 34, 149). Bronze Age petroglyphs combining human and bird elements have been

found at various sites in Mongolia (Jacobson 1997). In central Asia, petroglyphs from Bukantau in the Kyzylkum Desert and supposedly dating from the second millennium B.C. to the first centuries of the Christian era, depict bird-like anthropomorphs (Sher and Garyaeva 1996: 107-8).

Other paintings depicting five figures that seem to combine bird and human features are found at Khyi rgan gag pa do (Barking Old Dog Headland), on the north shore of gNam mtsho. Painted in a very different manner than those at Brag dkar, they nevertheless belong to the pre-Buddhist period. Three of these figures at Khyi rgan are illustrated here for consideration (Fig. 27). The cultural associations of ornitho-therianthropic compositions can be summed up as follows: (1) representation of the magical transformation of adepts; (2) representation of indigenous deities such as *yul lha*, *dgra lha*, *pho lha* and *mkha' 'gro ma*; and (3) demonstrations of religious power and social status.

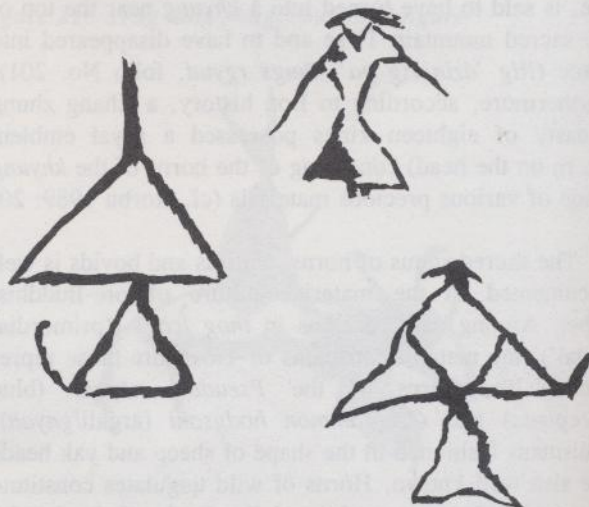


Figure 27. Khyi rgan gag pa do, bird-like figures.

Also notable at Brag dkar are three unidentified symbols, which may be related to the modified Tibetan inscriptions already surveyed (Fig. 28). The symbol on the right resembles letters encountered in Figures 8 and 9. The wealth of unusual inscriptions at bKra shis do shows that there is still much to learn about Tibetan palaeoart traditions. Across the second symbol written, much smaller and in a darker pigment, is a horizontal row of four characters. These are Tungusic language characters, ideograms that also had phonetic equivalents. As such, they were probably drawn between the early 10th and 13th century A.D. Liao and Qin dynasty inscriptions are relatively rare and therefore, specimens at gNam mtsho may prove highly valuable in elucidating contacts between Tibet and these non-Han dynasties.



Figure 28. Brag dkar, unusual symbols, Tungusic language inscription and 'tiger'.

On the bottom right side of Figure 28 is a painting of a 'tiger' (*stag*), an important animal in early Bon mythology⁸. The long tail and striped body of this rather crudely rendered zoomorph seem unmistakable (the animal's gaping jaws are just outside the photograph). Not common by any means, there are only a few paintings of carnivorous animals at gNam mtsho (Bellezza 1997a: 199, 200), in contrast to the scores of herbivores. From what has been published this paucity of predators seems to extend to the rock art of other areas of the Byang thang. The only exception seems to be petroglyphs closely allied with the steppe art of the Scythians found in Ri mo dong township, Ru thog county (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 29, 30, 38; Francfort et al. 1992: 165), where striped predators reminiscent of tigers chase cervids (also found in Zangs dkar (Zanskar) and in sPi ti (Spiti), in India, on the extreme western edge of the Tibetan plateau). In the steppes there are characteristic Bronze Age and Iron Age petroglyphs of animals chasing and fighting one another and include the leopard and tiger (Tang Huisheng 1993: 88). This contrasts with the

scarcity of animals of prey in the Byang thang. The tiger, an important image in Xiong Nu bronze plaques, is widely diffused among petroglyphs and the two appear to be culturally connected (Tang Huisheng 1993: 88). Predators chasing and attacking animals are found in petroglyphs of Yinshan and Helimu in Inner Mongolia (Tang Huisheng 1993: 87).

This lack of apparent tiger depictions in cave art seems curious, given the animal's ancient prominence. Squeamishness appears not to be the reason behind the absence of beasts of prey, for much of Byang thang rock art is preoccupied with hunting where the gory details of the killing of animals is chronicled. Battles between combatants are also well represented at gNam mtsho (Suolang Wangdui 1994: 181, 198; Bellezza 1997a: 185-6, 206-7), and include compositions not yet published (hunting and war paintings found at gNam mtsho are the subject of a paper in progress).

A land called sTag gzig (Tiger Leopard), which might be identified with the modern-day ethnic entity of greater Tadjikistan, is often considered the source of the Bon religion. A number of Bon deities is associated with the tiger, the best known being sTag lha me 'bar (Blazing Tiger God). In pastoral regions the tiger god sTag lha khra bo is the protective deity of men and the leopard goddess gZig lha khra mo is the protective deity of woman (Norbu 1997: 28, 29, 78, 79). 'Tiger' was also commonly prefixed to personal names in early times. Examples include the Bon adept sTag ber li ber, the Tibetan king sTag bu snya gzigs, the minister mGar Mang po rje sTag rtsan and the prince Zings po rje sTag skya bo. Place names also often include the tiger; such as sTag lung (Tiger Valley), sTag rong (Tiger Valley), and sTag rtse (Tiger Peak), the ancient seat of the Tibetan kings.

The *Lung stan bzhugs so* (folio No. 74) states that due to his meditation and other practices, the early Bon adept Dran pa Nam mkha could manifest as a tiger, lion and *khyung* (rDzu phrul sTag dang seng ge khyung du sprul pa) and that cervids and carnivorous animals surrounded him (ri dags dang spyang zan gyis bskor ba byed pa). The text *Rig dzin rig pai thugs rgyud* (folio No. 201) mentions that among his ordinary accomplishments, Tag ber li ber could keep tigers, leopards, bear and *dred* (Tibetan blue bear) as if they were sheep. The tiger is also celebrated as one of the four animals of the prayer flag (*rlung dar*).

In the kLu khang (House of the Serpent Spirits), in what I have called the third ancillary chamber, is a panel of Bon symbols and letters dating from the 7th to 13th century A.D. (Fig. 29). Composed at different times in red ochre, these now have a jumbled appearance. They consist of the syllables A, ka, ga, Hum and possibly kha. There are also several Bon *g.yung drung* and some unidentified motifs. A design which either represents *nor bu me 'bar* (flaming jewels) or some kind of *gtor ma* (commonly, consecrated cakes offered to deities) is just out of the photograph published here (for a somewhat similar example see Bellezza 1997a: 202).

⁸ The tiger is still found in the forests of south-eastern Tibet and in ancient times it may have ranged as far as the Trans-Himalaya.



Figure 29. *kLu khang*, third ancillary chamber, Bon letters and symbols.

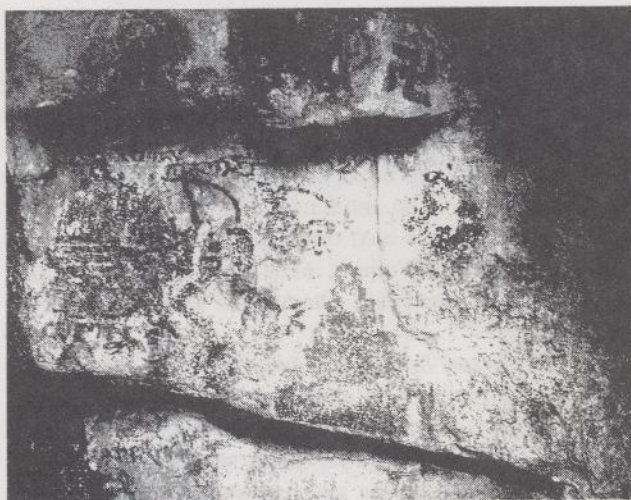


Figure 30. *sTong shong phug*, Bon paintings, inscriptions and 'graffiti'.

3. Sites on the north shore of *gNam mtsho*

At *sTong shong phug*, a large cave with an imagery which has exclusively maintained its Bon mythology, on the north shore of *gNam mtsho*, are a number of rock paintings (Fig. 30). A composition depicting a counter-clockwise swastika below a conjoined sun and moon symbol (*nyi zla*) evidently has no modern copies in the Bon religion (Fig. 31). The sun and moon (also found at *Brag dkar*, *bKra shis do chen*) in its most ancient form probably had cosmological significance — as it does in much of the world. However, at the time this composition was painted (probably 7th to 13th century A.D.), the religious symbolism had shifted to Indian tantricism. The sun and the moon in this context symbolise the female (wisdom/*shes rab*) and male (method/*thabs*) prin-

ciples that lead to enlightenment.

Another aesthetically captivating composition in *sTong shong phug* is that of a letter A below a partially effaced Bon *g.yung drung* (Fig. 32). The A, the last letter of the Tibetan alphabet, is replete with mystical significance. It stands for deity, and *chos sku*, the primordial state of being in both the Bon and Buddhist traditions. Also in the cavernous *sTong shong phug* are four *mchod rten* which were also probably painted by the Bon po (two of them are visible in Fig. 30). In one of the caves in the vicinity of *sTong shong phug*, two more *mchod rten* were painted in a simple manner (Fig. 33). As per the Bon mythology of *sTong shong phug*, these too were probably sketched by the Bon po.

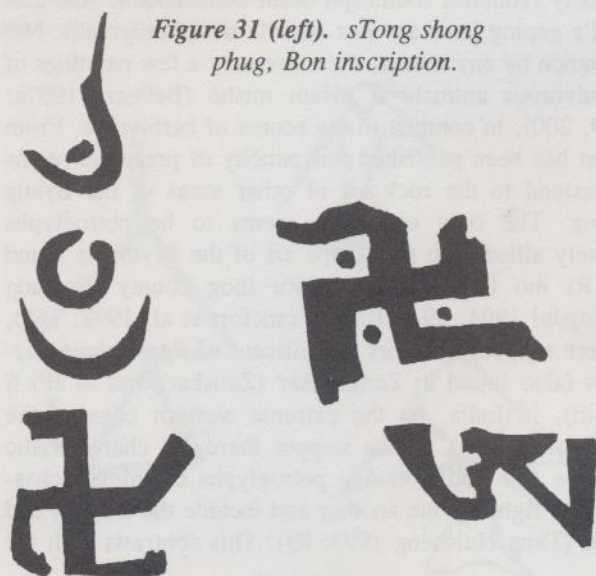


Figure 31 (left). *sTong shong phug*, Bon inscription.

Figure 32. *sTong shong phug*, Bon inscription.

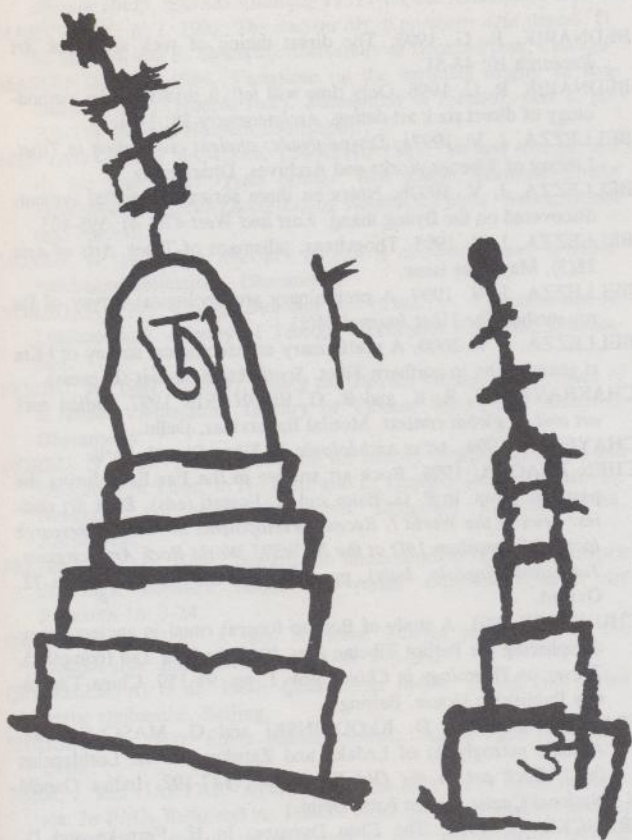


Figure 33. Cave in vicinity of sTong shong phug, pair of mchod rten.

At Rigs Inga do, named after the resemblance of the pinnacles of the formation to the Lamaist *rigs Inga* crown, are several caves with inscriptions. The most unusual of them features a conjoined sun and moon above 'Om ma Hum' written horizontally (Fig. 34). Below the lettering is a Bon *g.yung drung* and an unrecognisable application of pigment beside it. This style of inscription is not used in modern Bon and was painted sometime between the 7th and 13th century. The wording of the mantra is also curious as the standard ejaculation should read 'Om A Hum'. In Bon, the syllables Om and ma symbolise the male and female cosmological elements respectively as in the celebrated ejaculation 'Om ma tri mu ye sa las 'du'. In addition to the counter-clockwise swastika, the double vowel sign (*sna ro*) of the Om distinguishes this as a Bon composition.

Another possibly Bon inscription at Rigs Inga do reads 'Bro gros nor ldan ma', which may indicate an expression of reliance on a certain female deity. The Buddhist *ma ni* and *vajra mantra-s* are also represented at Rigs Inga do; they belong to the religion which eventually superseded Bon and which came to dominate the religious sentiments of the Tibetan people.

Conclusion

The study of rock art is very important to our under-

standing of the cultural development of Tibet. No other Tibetan cultural resource has proven as chronologically or thematically encompassing. The cataloguing, description and analysis of rock paintings and petroglyphs acquires added significance when we consider that relatively little archaeological research has been conducted in Tibet. Rock art chronicles both the pre-Historic and Historic phases of the Plateau and can be used in tandem with textual and ethnographic data in order to build a more complete picture of Tibetan cultural evolution.



Figure 34. Rig Inga do, Bon inscription.

In my study of the pre-Buddhist cultural heritage of the Byang thang, I have found that rock art corroborates and enhances data derived from other types of archaeological sites, texts and ethnographic sources. As we learn more this multidisciplinary approach will be better defined and assume new synergistic dimensions. Ultimately, I believe this will lead to new scholarly insights concerning the development of Eurasian civilisation.

As rock art is emblematic of Tibetan culture, research into this field should be accelerated. There still must be many unrecorded sites that deserve attention. Even most documented sites have yet to be comprehensively inventoried or assessed. Once we have a firmer idea of the extent and content of rock art in Tibet the next step will entail archaeometric analysis. With the

collaboration of researchers belonging to the physical sciences scholars will develop powerful new methodologies for the study of Tibetan cultural history, cultural ecology and religion. This end is best served by marshalling the resources of the international academic community, local communities in Tibet and the Chinese government in a mutually beneficial partnership. Only in the spirit of co-operation will we make progress in revealing Tibet's august past.

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Résumé. *A ce jour le plus grand ensemble de peintures rupestres découvert au Tibet est celui de gNam mtsho, un lac sur le plateau, le deuxième en surface totale. L'article étudie une sélection de ces peintures, qui sont en relation avec le Bon, religion primitive du Tibet. Les peintures rupestres bon de gNam msho appartiennent à la fois à la période bon ancienne (de l'Age des Métaux au 10ème siècle) et à la période qui suit, celle où la religion bon fut profondément influencée par le bouddhisme. Cette tradition artistique ancienne inclut à la fois des inscriptions et des sujets figuratifs. Elle est susceptible de constituer une source indépendante de vérification des données textuelles sur l'histoire du Tibet.*

Zusammenfassung. *Die größte Konzentration von Felsmalereien, die bisher in Tibet entdeckt wurde, liegt bei gNam mtsho, dem zweitgrößten See auf dem Plateau. Dieser Artikel untersucht eine Auswahl der Malereien, die mit Bon, der alten Religion von Tibet, verbunden werden. Bon Felsbilder bei gNam mtsho gehören zur frühen Bon Periode (Metallzeit bis 10. Jahrhundert) sowie zur nachfolgenden Periode, als die Bon Religion unter schweren buddhistischen Einfluß kam. Diese Paläokunst-Tradition, die sowohl Inschriften als auch figurative Formen umfaßt, hat die potentielle Fähigkeit, als unabhängige Nachprüfung von Textquellen für Information über tibetanische Geschichte zu dienen.*

Resumen. *Hasta ahora la mayor concentración de pinturas rupestres descubiertas en el Tibet se encuentra en gNam mtsho, el segundo lago más grande en la meseta. Este artículo examina una selección de estas pinturas que están relacionadas con Bon, la antigua religión del Tibet. Pinturas rupestres Bon en gNam mtsho pertenecen tanto al período Bon temprano (Edad de los Metales hasta el siglo X) como al período subsiguiente cuando la religión Bon llegó a estar bajo una fuerte influencia Budista. Esta tradición de paleoarte, que comprende tanto inscripciones como formas representativas, tiene la capacidad potencial de servir como una verificación independiente de fuentes textuales de información sobre la historia del Tibet.*

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