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# *A Preliminary Archaeological Survey of Da Rog mTsho*

John Vincent Bellezza\*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I record archaeological data collected on my November 1997 expedition to Da rog mtsho (also spelled Dwa rog mtsho and Da rogs mtsho). Several years ago, the senior-most Bon scholar Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, informed me that Da rog mtsho had a reputation among the Bonpo for being an important part of the Zhang zhung kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The findings of my survey bear this out. In this paper I will explore numerous ruins which are associated with the ancient Bonpo and most likely, the Zhang zhung kingdom.

Da rog mtsho (elevation approximately 4566 meters) is located in Lung dkar township, 'Brong pa county, which is part of the gZhis ka rtse prefecture. In the pre-Communist period it was part of Bar ma tsho pa, one of the nine camps (*tsho pa*) of 'Brong pa. The region from early times has been called Gra bye (pronounced in the local dialect Grab yer, which has given rise to this alternative spelling). The lake is about 40 kilometers long, and very special in that it is one of the few lakes in Byang thang which contain fresh water. The main river feeding it is the sBu stod gtsang po, one of the largest in Byang thang. To the west of Da rog mtsho is the Lung dkar range, one of the three great meridian ranges in Byang thang.

My first exposure to the ancient cultural wealth of Da rog mtsho came from a family at the settlement of Na gras, on the northwest corner of the lake. They explained to me that by coming to the north shore of the lake, I had entered a precinct of special religious and historic interest to the Bonpo. These places they added had been abandoned a very long time ago. Most 'brog pas I met at the north shore of Da rog mtsho echoed these words as did 'brog pas in settlements east of the lake. The person farthest from the lake who attributed ruins located there to the ancient Bonpo was mKhan po Tshul khirms, aged 69, the abbot of sMan stong monastery in the mTsho chen county seat, located 100 kilometers east of Da rog mtsho. However, no one I met could supply detailed historical lore. According to

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g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan who visited Da rog mtsho in 1954 or 1955, the people of the area told him that these Bon ruins were haunted by demons (*'dre gdon*) and that they avoided them.<sup>2</sup> When g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan, a Bonpo, expressed an interest in meditating in the Bon holy places, he was dissuaded by the locals who warned him that he would be killed should he visit them alone.

On the north side of the Da rog mtsho drainage basin I located six small permanent settlements with a total of about 14 households (*gzhis ma*). In other words, this part of the lake is sparsely populated. One main reason is the limited pasturage available—the north side of the basin is only a few kilometers wide and there are few marshy areas to support winter grazing grounds (*dgun sa*). While most of the 14 households have built small mud brick homes in the last decade, previously they lived exclusively in tents. This appears to have been the state of affairs for centuries. However, the wealth of cave hermitages and ruins clearly demonstrate that at some time in the past Da rog mtsho was much more developed and populated than at any time in recent history.<sup>3</sup>

A systematic examination of the archaeological sites at Da rog mtsho demonstrates that a preferred construction site was the east side of the headlands and islands along the western half of the north shore. These sites overlook large expanses of water, facing the rising sun.<sup>4</sup> These places also have maximal exposure to the lake—it is clear that the builders wanted to be as close as possible to Da rog mtsho. They had what appears to be a close relationship with the water. The sacred status of the lake must have had something to do with locating the structures next to the water. The *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar* tells us that the Bon adept Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po (8th century) came to Da rog mtsho, described as a place where *smān* and many other spirits are located (see n.25). Today the situation is very different—settlements are located far from the lake-shore.<sup>5</sup> Lung dkar monastery and settlement are at least five kilometers from the lake-shore and the *'brog pa* settlements of the north shore are generally from one half to three kilometers from the shore.

Another possible reason for locating structures on headlands, an island, and escarpments is the inherent defensibility of these sites. Irrespective of cultural and religious factors dictating the ancient patterns of settlement, they also served a utilitarian purpose—the easy collection of potable water. Da rog mtsho is the only permanent source of water on the north shore.

A key ecological difference between the past and present are trees. Oral histories speak of *'om bu* (tamarisk) growing in the area but now one only finds the woody shrub *bra ma*, and this only in small quantities. According

to Bon legend, sNang bzher lod po protected trees at Da rog mtsho from those who would cut them down. It would appear that at one time the environment of the area was less harsh than today.

#### THE GATEWAY TO THE ANTIQUITIES

We will begin the survey from the southwest corner of Da rog mtsho and proceed in a clockwise direction along the west and then north shores. The survey will terminate near the southeast corner of the lake. I did not survey the south shore of the lake.

Near the southwest corner of Da rog mtsho is the *'brog pa* settlement of *'Brog pa tshe*, and nearby is the Da rog mtsho dar lcog. This prayer flag mast and associated cairns are dedicated to the goddess of the lake.<sup>6</sup> Passing the escarpment of Phyag brang khrang, one eventually arrives at a plain abutting the northwest corner of the lake in which the Nar chu river flows. Just south of this plain where the motorable road hugs the lake-shore, is an oblong heap of dressed stones about three meters long. Its identity escapes me. Beyond where the Nar chu debouches in Da rog mtsho is the settlement of Na gras consisting of two households.

Continuing along the north shore east of Na gras one comes to a stunning multicolored escarpment overlooking the lake called rDzong dkar po. rDzong dkar po is considered a sacred site but no one I spoke to could furnish me with historical details or the whereabouts of *rang byung* features. There are a few unmodified "meditation caves" (*sgrub phug*) in the escarpment. The first of these is a long narrow cave with a low ceiling located about two meters up in the escarpment. Just to the west, the Buddhist mantra "*Om vajra sattva hum*" has been inscribed into the cliff. Further west in the escarpment, the *maṇi* mantra has been inscribed in several locations. The mantras are well worn and perhaps were inscribed centuries ago. In one of the *sgrub phug* there is a stone-lined chamber about one cubic meter in size, in the floor of the cave. Scattered around are slabs of stone which at one time must have concealed its opening. At the base of the eastern extremity of rDzong dkar po is a seasonal *'brog pa* encampment. Above it is what may be a ruined *mchod rten* about three meters square and a retaining wall built into the slope which has a few *maṇi* stones.

#### DO GYI PHUG

Several kilometers east of rDzong dkar po is a narrow peninsula jutting into the lake called Do gyi phug.<sup>7</sup> It is connected to the mainland by a thin, low-lying gravel spit and it terminates in a rocky headland. In prehistoric times when the level of Byang thang lakes was higher, the headland must have been an island. On the summit of the headland is a

crumbling cairn which appears to have been long abandoned. I found no *maṇi* stones at Do gyi phug lending credence to its Bon associations in oral history.

While there are no signs of structures on the west side of the headland, a number of structures of archaeological interest are found on its east side. Near the tip of the headland (southeast side) is a ruin built of reddish stones about three meters square.<sup>8</sup> The walls have been reduced to a scattering of stones. The wall of the structure built into the rocky headland is composed of large blocks, each up to one meter in length. This wall extends past the currently visible enclosure, an indication that the original structure might have been larger than three meters square.

In the middle of the remaining structure a stone column was expertly built (as a monument to the ancient site?) which is two meters tall and 60 cm square. The column is made up of two large well hewn stones (similar to those in the escarpment wall) on which rest many courses of thin sandstone blocks. On the column a few pieces of white quartz have been placed. On one side of the ruin a stone shed has been constructed around a boulder. This boulder has a white deposition on its surface in which the *maṇi* mantra has been crudely scratched as well as another unreadable one-line inscription. On surrounding rock faces several small cairns were erected.

Walking north or towards the mainland from the first site, one encounters another ruin built into the escarpment. Its outer wall and entranceway face east directly onto the lake. The walls are a maximum of 2.5 meters tall and the doorway is 1.2 meters tall. The wall facing Da rog mtsho is approximately 2.5 meters long and the structure is two meters wide. The wall opposite the entranceway is the escarpment itself, not one constructed of blocks. Dressed stones were used for construction which are much wider and longer than they are tall.<sup>9</sup> The walls are composed of double courses of stone and are about 50 cm thick. Substantial piles of building blocks lay in the vicinity—perhaps other structures existed adjacent to it. The lintel over the entranceway consists of two stones about 80 cm in length. The interior of the structure has been back-filled with earth and rubble and climax lichens grow on some of the inner and outer walls, an indication that the site has not been occupied for a long time.

Approximately another 30 meters towards the headland, on a terrace located above Da rog mtsho, is another ruin roughly nine meters in length. About seven meters of a rear wall (wall opposite lake) is distinguishable and building stones lay scattered about. The rear wall extends about one meter below the level of the ground.

Roughly another 30 meters towards the mainland along the east side of the headland is another ruin. This site is built into a steep slope overlooking Da rog mtsho and is the most intact at Do gyi phug. It consists of at least four rooms built in a row. The three intact rooms form a structure nine meters long and three meters wide (exterior dimensions), and the walls are about 50 cm thick. Like the other Do gyi phug structures it is built of many courses of flat stones. The stones were cemented together using a reddish brown mortar.<sup>10</sup> The west or rear wall is built into the slope and barely protrudes above it.

The largest of the three rooms, the north room, has inner dimensions of two meters by 1.2 meters. The north wall of the north room was built with rounded corners, and there is a niche inside the inner west wall. The entranceway to the north room is approximately 1.2 meters tall and is supported by a stone lintel. The exterior height of the room is two meters, and inside, from floor to ceiling, it is 1.6 meters in height. The walls near the top of the structure taper inwards to accommodate the roof slabs. This is the only structure discovered at Da rog mtsho with its roof preserved intact. The roof is built of stone slabs more or less one meter in length, which are laid on top of one another in an overlapping fashion.<sup>11</sup> There is also a stone slab which runs between the east and west walls and functions as a cross beam (Fig.1). The stone slabs of the roof are covered with an earth or clay-based material.<sup>12</sup>

The central room is smaller and has lost its roof as well as being largely back-filled with earth and rubble. The west and south walls of the central room have niches (*bang khung*) in them. The south room is also smaller than the north room and is back-filled. About one quarter of its stone roof has survived. Evidently, at one time there were one or two rooms adjacent to the south room lying to the east. The structure originally appears to have been "L" shaped. It is, however, hard to judge because the walls of these other rooms have been mostly destroyed.

#### LHA KHANG DMAR CHAG

Continuing along the lake-shore in an easterly direction from Do gyi phug one passes close to the *'brog pa* settlement of Gond do, located about one kilometer from Da rog mtsho. Past Gond do an escarpment again forms to hem in the north shore. There in the crags is a *dur khrod* marked by mani walls and cast-off possessions of the deceased.

After an intervening plain there is a headland with three or four shallow raw caves at its base. East of them at the base of the cliff, heaps of stones and a foundation wall about six meters long are visible. The wall encloses one side of a level area which might mark an old building site. Opposite it a small islet barely sticks out of the water. Further along a

cairn marks the summit of a headland. The plain above the headlands and escarpments which abut the mountains ringing the lake basin now ends and the mountains come directly down to the beach, beginning a long series of cliffs and caves. The gravel beach and gravel bars sandwiched between the escarpments and the lake is called 'Phrang lam. The 'Phrang lam runs along the north shore for approximately five kilometers.

At the western extremity of the 'Phrang lam at the base of the cliff, a 14 cm tall cruciform design (probably a style of *g.yung drung*) was painted in red ochre. Just to the east on the same rock face, is an unusual cave painting measuring roughly 30 x 30 cm rendered in orange and white pigments (Fig.2).<sup>13</sup> The lower-most figure is that of a Tibetan letter "A" painted in orange ochre. Above it are several unrecognizable symbols (identification was hampered by a lack of clarity). At the top right of the painting is a 15 x 15 cm square painted in white containing linear designs. It remotely resembles designs found on Tibetan seals. In a shallow cave adjacent to this rock face I found an indistinguishable blotch of ochre pigment.

Above the beach-level cliff is a cave with the remains of an enclosing wall about three meters across. Higher up in the escarpment is a larger unmodified cave. On its right rear wall there is a 32 cm tall crudely painted red ochre *mchod rten*. Part of the spire of this *mchod rten* is visible and strongly suggests a Bon identity. Next to it is an unidentifiable blotch which may also have been a *mchod rten*. On the left rear wall of the cave an 18 cm tall red ochre *g.yung drung* can be distinguished. As I was surveying this cave, I came to notice the vestiges of stone steps leading further up into the escarpment. I climbed the broken trail to discover a Bon hermitage hidden in a huge overhang.

I was later to learn that this Bon hermitage is locally called Lha khang dmar chag (the Red-Colored Chapel), which is said to have functioned as a place of meditation (*bsam khang*) (Fig.3). On the shelf below the overhang walls were built to create several chapels and or residences. Three of these are still intact and represent the only known ancient Bon temple standing in western Tibet (as far as I know; at least for the time being). As Lha khang dmar chag was long abandoned by the time of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards evidently ignored the site. Long since in decline it was spared from annihilation.

At the east end of the site mud stucco was applied to the cliff to create a panel 1.1 meters long which was then painted white. On the panel are three lines of *dbu can* script painted in red ochre comprising the Eight-syllable *ma tri* mantra (*Om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du*) (top line), and the famous Bon mantra attributed to gShen rab mi bo che and dedicated to Kun tu bzang po (*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du/ A dkar a rmad du tri su nag po zhi*

*zhi mal mal*/). Below the inscription in red ochre, in the margin, is a fragmentary inscription in small black-colored *dbu can* letters. Above the inscription on the same kind of prepared surface, an image of Ta pi hri tsa, the 25th lineage lama of the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud* tradition is found (Fig.4).<sup>14</sup> He is depicted in an attitude of meditation, white in color, and resembling in form Kun tu bzang po (the Primordial Buddha). The image is contained in a tri-foliated aureole with a red ochre background. The iconography of the figure is an important clue to the age of the hermitage. As such, I am provisionally dating it circa 950 to 1200 using art historical clues.<sup>15</sup> Such a date, if accurate, makes Lha khang dmar chag contemporaneous with the Gu ge kingdom and the florescence of Buddhist monastic culture which took place in this period.<sup>16</sup> The inscription and image of Ta pi hri tsa incontrovertibly identify the hermitage as belonging to the Bonpo and a place where *rdzogs chen* was practiced. This, of course, does not preclude the hermitage from having been used for Bon tantric practice (*spyi spungs*). The presence of the elaborately constructed inscription and image of Ta pi hri tsa suggests that it was a dedicatory structure sanctifying and identifying the hermitage and those who occupied it.

Left of Ta pi hri tsa is a curious extension of the panel covered in white pigment. According to Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, this might be where an image of sNang bzher lod po, the main student of Ta pi hri tsa, was originally located. East of the panel at the foot of the cliff, is a stone and earth platform. Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag says that it might have originally functioned as a throne for a senior religious figure. Below the dedicatory panel and some meters west, a *g.yung drung* of Bon style (counter clockwise) and a letter "A" were painted in orange-red ochre on the cliff face. Just above them one finds another *g.yung drung* of Bon style which is 5.5 cm in height.

West of the swastikas is the first of the chapels we will survey. Its facade is composed of a nine meter long beehive-shaped stone wall painted in red and white vertical stripes (Fig.5). This wall which was not covered in plaster is at least four meters tall. While functional it lacks the sophisticated masonry work of some of the other ruins we will explore at Da rog mtsho. Moreover it is not a free standing structure.

The facade is 70 cm thick at the entrance. The entranceway is 1.5 meters tall and above it a stucco panel was built on the wall. In the panel "*A om hum*" was written in raised letters and a *g.yung drung* in Bon style painted in red ochre.<sup>17</sup> At the east end of the facade wall is a horde of *tshwa tshwa* with *mchod rten* and long life deity designs. They do not appear very old. On the west side of the wall in raised parget letters the following mantras were written: "*A om hum ram dza*" and "*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du.*"

Also on the west end of the exterior facade wall the mantra "*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du*" was written in red ochre on a large stone in the wall, as well as something else which is unreadable contained within a border consisting of two lines painted around the stone. Superimposed over the upper left section of the inscription is a *g.yung drung* in Buddhist style (clockwise). This appears to signal the Buddhist occupation of the site subsequent to the Bonpo. Da rog mtsho is now exclusively Buddhist and all indications are that it has been for centuries.

The chapel created by the facade is approximately four meters deep. In the middle of it is a stone and adobe platform about 1.2 meters square and at least 25 cm tall. The sides of it are painted red and white. It was probably originally used for maṇḍala offerings. On the west wall of the chapel in red ochre is the mantra "*A om huṃ ram dza*" and beside it, a design consisting of a *nor bu* and conjoined sun and moon.

There are no signs of current inhabitation and little sign of human activity in this chapel or the other chapels at Lha khang dmar chag. Horns of goats are strewn on the floor and several young stuffed goat carcasses hang from the ceiling on ropes. This seems to represent a tradition whereby kids that die of natural causes are brought to the hermitage and offered to protector deities probably to insure the protection of the remaining kids.<sup>18</sup>

The next two chapels face east, and therefore, form an "L" pattern with the east chapel. The chapel adjacent to the beehive-shaped facade (central chapel) is constructed in a different fashion. Its facade which is about three meters long and less than two meters tall, has been covered with a veneer of earth-colored roughcast. On the outside of the facade inscriptions, symbols and motifs were painted. The haphazard juxtaposition and superimposition of paintings demonstrates that they were painted at different times, as well as by people with different purposes. A painting which might be as old as the structure itself is the ornamentation around the entranceway. This consists of orange-red, dark red, white and dark red stripes along the top and sides of the doorway (doorway = 90 x 65 cm).

On the top right corner of the facade the mantra "*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du*" was painted in a deep red ochre on a white background (Fig.6). However, the "*sa*" and "*le*" syllables were obscured by what appears to be the aureole of a deity outlined in white, yet whatever was contained within it has been completely effaced. The aureole also obscures part of an "*A om huṃ*" inscription painted in the same light red ochre. Above the 'A' in the first inscription are a red and a white *g.yung drung* in Bon style. Amidst the inscriptions are remnants of others painted and engraved attesting to the interplay of time that occurred here.

Immediately below the aforementioned inscriptions is the letter "A" written two times and below it, an inscription which reads: "*Trang po rgyal mtshan mo rgyur ngas/ zas nor sog cog ma byas pas*", which announces it was painted by a man named Trang po rgyal mtshan. Originally there was more to the inscription but it has been obliterated. Below this inscription a red *g.yung drung* in Bon style and a white flower can be distinguished, as well as what may represent a stylized *g.yung drung* boldly painted in red and white.

Above the entranceway there is a small window in the wall, and painted on a white background around it are the vestiges of short inscriptions. One of these written in a sloppy and disjointed manner seems to read: "*'Di na su yang ma 'ong dgrag ang ched po can po*" (warning meat eaters and those not looking for solitude not to come here). This inscription seems to allude to a social conflict which may well have pitted the Bonpo against the Buddhists. Does this signify the last throes of Bonpo occupation?

To the left of the entranceway a number of symbols have been painted. These include an endless knot in an unusual style, some of the auspicious symbols (fish, lotus, endless knot, conch, Dharma wheel), as well as flower and Bon styled *g.yung drung*. The most eye-catching of the *g.yung drung* is located in the top left corner and is painted in white on a red square background 18 cm in height. The readable inscriptions are: 1) *dbu can*—"Om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du"; 2) "*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du*"; 3) "*Rab sgang dbon po bdag gis*" (Bon dedicatory verse) (Fig.7); 4) "*bKod pa'i*" and 5) *dbu med*—"g*Sung mchog ma tri mu ye phan yon byin brlabs (sic. rlabs) thu (sic. mthu), stobs bsod nams gyi (sic. kyis) Pha ma gtsor byas khams gsum sems can rnams kyis sangs rgyas kyis sa la bkod par shog*" (Bon dedication for the welfare and blessings of all sentient beings).

Inside the central chapel on the right wall (separates central and east chapels) are six niches and a stone shelf. The right wall was finished in mud plaster. Against the rear cliff wall is an enclosure built of stone and adobe 75 cm square and 25 cm tall. There is also a pedestal or platform 75 cm square and 30 cm tall. Its front sides are painted red-orange on which a *nor bu*, a *dga' 'khyil* and other designs were painted in white. This structure might have supported a throne. On the left wall is a broken hearth (sign that chapel also functioned as a residence) and a stone entablature. Tufts of white wool and dabs of butter cling to the heavily blackened ceiling.<sup>19</sup> Stuffed kids hang suspended from the ceiling and the horns of goats are scattered on the floor.

The third intact structure or south chapel is interconnected to the central chapel. It is about 4.5 meters long, but less than half of its facade is intact and much of its entranceway was destroyed. Like the central

chapel, its exterior wall was covered in a mud plaster. On the exterior wall the following symbols were painted: solid white Bon styled *g.yung drung* outlined in red, red Bon styled *g.yung drung*, solid white letter "A" outlined in red, intricate red and white endless knots, red endless knot in an unusual design, red conch shell, red *lha gtsug*, and an unidentified design (a *gtor ma*?).

Inside the south chapel along the north wall (separates central and south chapels) the mantra "*A a dkar sa le 'od yang om 'du / A dkar a rmad du tri su nag po zhi zhi mal mal swa ha*" in white *dbu can* script was painted on a blue-gray tinted mud plaster background (Fig.8). The letters of this inscription are between 10 and 18 cm tall. Below it are heavily worn inscriptions in black-colored *dbu med* script, and "*bum yer cig*" has been written twice in orange-red ochre. Below the inscriptions a faint white border of interlocking Bon styled *g.yung drung* is visible. To the left of the inscriptions are two niches (Fig.9). On the interior of the facade an orange-red inscription was written over a dark red one. There is also a niche in this wall.

At the corner of the north wall and the west cave wall a platform more than 2.5 meters long was constructed. One side of the platform (might have been used for maṇḍala offerings) is painted in red while the other side hosts a blurry *dbu can* inscription in red ochre. Running the length of the west side of the platform is an adobe and stone barrier built between it and the cave wall. The side of the barrier facing the platform was painted blue gray and a border of tiny white conch shells trims its top and sides (Fig.10).<sup>20</sup> The decorated barrier wall is divided into five horizontal lines. The top line only spans a portion of the structure and is decorated with a circle (*maṇḍala*) made up of nine conch shells and the remnants of other designs. The second line contains sacred symbols, all of which are studded with conch shells and outlined in red ochre. The symbols include: four *nor bus*, seven circles, two Bon styled *g.yung drungs*, a parasol and three conches including an elaborately designed one. The third, fourth and fifth lines contain two inscriptions made up of earth-colored *dbu can* letters studded with the tiny conch shells. They read: "*A om hum ram dza*", followed by "*A a dkar sa le 'od a yang om 'du / A dkar a rmad du tri su nag po zhi zhi mal mal*".

To the south of the south temple are the remains of another wall which must have enclosed part of the overhang in the escarpment. This structure appears to have been long and narrow. Only one niche in the interior of the wall has survived. At Lha khang dmar chag I found two stone pestles which I left in situ, just as all other visitors to the site have done.

## SHA BA GDONG LHA KHANG AND OTHER SITES AT 'PHRANG LAM

Heading east from Lha khang dmar chag one encounters about 18 caves and niches overlooking the beach. At the east end of this series the two largest caves have human-built modifications. In one there are the remains of a wall, and at the other cave a stone facade and inside, the remains of a stone and adobe platform. Opposite these caves is the island of *zhabs rjes*. There is now a second series of approximately one dozen shoreline caves extending perhaps for two kilometers along the 'Phrang lam. One then reaches the unmistakable site of Sha ba gdong lha khang (Fig.11).

Sha ba gdong lha khang is suspended about five meters in the escarpment and has no non-technical route of access.<sup>21</sup> I was, therefore, not able to visit this spectacular site, however, g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan visited it in the 1950s. He was led to it by a local *'brog pa* who explained to him that its name was derived from the surrounding cliff which is said to look like the face of a deer.<sup>22</sup> The deer is envisioned as looking towards the lake. The *'brog pa* also told him that Sha ba gdong lha khang was a Bon holy place long since abandoned. g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan describes the difficult climb up to the cave and having to lower firewood down from the more accessible esplanade located above. Sha ba gdong lha khang, a large cave, was partitioned into several rooms, one of which was a kitchen according to g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan. He also describes the retreat caves and *mchod rten* east of Sha ba gdong lha khang.

Opposite Sha ba gdong lha khang is the island of Do dril bu which is remarkably shaped like a bell. East of Sha ba gdong lha khang is another series of caves and access to the esplanade, which separates the beach from the higher reaches of the escarpment. This esplanade has a good trail, and in prehistoric times when the level of the lake was higher, must have been part of the main route along the north shore. On the esplanade is a cave with the remnants of an encircling wall and a constructed stone niche inside. A little east is a deeper cave which also has the remains of an enclosing wall, as well as a line of foundation stones on the ledge above it.

Continuing east for perhaps 200 meters, the esplanade widens to reveal a couple of archaeological sites. At one of these sites foundation walls cover an area of roughly 4.5 meters by 10.5 meters. The ruins are built on a ledge and like every other site surveyed at Da rog mtsho overlook the lake.<sup>23</sup> One can only conclude that the ancient inhabitants saw it as imperative to be in sight of their holy lake (from which their supply of vital water came).

About 70 meters east and higher up the slope is another structural complex. This one consists of outer and inner walls concealing a cave. At a corner of the outer wall a grey *rdo ring* of half a meter tall is found. It

may have been erected to mark the foundation of the structure.<sup>24</sup> After passing through the outer wall four stone steps lead down into the cave. The cave is about 5.5 meters long and a maximum of three meters wide, and was partitioned into two rooms. In the larger of the two there is a square hearth built of stones in the middle of the floor. There is one niche built into the interior facade wall of the larger room and four niches in the smaller room. The interior of the facade and partition were painted white giving the cave a light, welcome appearance. Some unintelligible lettering and a Bon styled *g.yung drung* were scratched into the partition wall. Near the cave is a small prayer flag mast.

Returning to the beach there are a series of modified caves east of Sha ba gdong lha khang. These caves are situated at a higher level than the raw caves indicating that they have not been submerged for a very long time, and potentially inhabited for a longer period of time. The raw caves, of course, would have been underwater much more recently. The first of these caves is small but it has the vestiges of a formidable facade around it which was at least half a meter thick. Like many of the structures at Darog mtsho this one exhibits a great deal of wear and disintegration. Inside it is a carefully constructed niche built of mortared stones which may have functioned as an altar. A few more meters east is a longer cave with much of its facade intact. The cave is about 7.5 meters long (side parallel lake) and 2.25 meters deep and was partitioned into two rooms. Constructed in the rear of the cave against the escarpment are a large and a small niche. There is also a stone bay about one meter tall which has a small opening. Undoubtedly it was either used for storage or to enshrine something.

Again, just a little east, is another modified cave along the beach. This one was partitioned into at least two rooms. Some of the facade and stairs leading down to one of the rooms have been preserved. Its facade was finely constructed of flat stones which were mortared together. Adjacent are the remains of an interconnected row of *mchod rten* sheltered under an overhang in the escarpment. The *mchod rten* were integrated into one unit and form a base six meters long. Extending from the top of this base were perhaps four *bum pa* on each side of a larger central *bum pa*, however, only the remnants of six *bum pas* are still visible. The structure is built of flat stones plastered with a white veneer and the base was trimmed in red ochre. From what remains it is not clear whether the *mchod rten* belonged to the Bonpo or Buddhists. Nearby to the east is a cave with the vestiges of both a facade and inner wall.

About two more kilometers, at the eastern extremity of the 'Phrang lam, is a site simply called mChod rten marked by a natural stone spire. The first cave has three entrances including one which is "A" shaped. Inside

there is a *mchod rten* whose base measures 1.25 meters by 2.9 meters. Originally it was crowned with three *bum pas*, of which the larger central one is partially intact. The *mchod rten* was covered in mud plaster painted white and trimmed in red. The base of the *mchod rten* is filled with *tshwa tshwa* which do not appear to be very old. The east entrance to the cave is connected to a three meter long passageway leading to a smaller cave. In this cave are the remains of a square stone structure plastered and painted red. Was this a *rten mkhar* or some other kind of shrine? Outside, the *maṇi* mantra has been inscribed into boulders at least four times all of which are highly worn. A little east is another similarly-sized triple *bum pa mchod rten*. *Maṇi* stones lie in its vicinity. On the east side of the *mchod rten* rubble has back-filled the cave almost to the top of its base.

Next an imposing facade encloses another cave about four meters long. One must climb a 1.5 meter high flight of steps in order to enter the cave. In the right rear of the cave a wall has been built against the escarpment which has a series of shelves, and a large niche about two meters deep. In the center rear of the cave is an altar-like structure. There are also shelves along the right wall. The blackened ceiling and neatness of this cave give the impression that unlike many of the others, it has been recently occupied. Outside is a seasonal pastoral camp, and on the esplanade above mChod rten there are four well maintained *maṇi* walls. These *maṇi* walls represent the most extensive contemporary religious structures found on the north shore of Da rog mtsho.

But what of the retreat caves and *mchod rten*? While the Bonpo identification of sites on the north shore is the predominant theme in the oral histories, we must consider the possibility that some of these monuments post-date the Bonpo occupation and are in fact representative of Buddhism. In general 'brog pa oral histories are not well historicized: proto-historical, or historical Bon sites and Buddhist sites of the "later spread of the doctrine" could well have been confused through the passage of the centuries. Again, only a detailed archaeological investigation will put such matters to rest.

#### MTSHO DO

East of mChod rten is the largest peninsula (roughly six square kilometers) at Da rog mtsho, the site of the most extensive detectable archaeological remains on the north shore. Opposite this peninsula is the largest island at Da rog mtsho which is called mTsho do, the site of an important place of practice for sNang bzher lod po (Fig.12).<sup>25</sup> On the east side of mTsho do are at least one group of ruins.<sup>26</sup> These consist of no less than six freestanding structures similar in appearance to the ones we will survey at the big peninsula.

In aggregate, the structures at the big peninsula represent a formidable human presence—far larger than the entire contemporary north shore. As a whole, the structural remains are numerous enough to have originally accommodated many tens if not hundreds of people. Not only are the structures freestanding or with just one side built into rock faces, they often involved highly skilled masonry techniques.<sup>27</sup> Like Do gyi phug, the structures of the big peninsula are largely constructed of quartzitic sandstone cut into flat blocks. These blocks were laid in parallel courses two or three rows thick. Between the courses interlocking layers of small stones were positioned.

Like Do gyi phug, I did not find any ancient traces of human inhabitation on the west side of the big peninsula. These begin at the tip of the peninsula in view of the eastern half of the lake. Here at the tip of the peninsula is a stone structure about six meters in length divided into two halves. Its walls are now around one meter tall but many building blocks lay scattered around the site. The structure appears to have been rebuilt and maintained perhaps until quite recently, however, there is no sign of current occupation. The big peninsula has limited pasturage, and therefore, is not heavily frequented. Adjacent to the standing structure is a similarly-sized structure whose walls now barely stick out of the ground. Nearby is a ring of stones about two meters in diameter with four upturned stones around its edge. Is this a cist? In the vicinity stones lay scattered over an area of level ground measuring 4.5 meters by nine meters. This also appears to be an old building site.

Continuing in a clockwise direction around the peninsula are structural remains built high up in a cliff. They measure no more than three meters by three meters and the existing walls are a maximum of 1.3 meters tall, and the interior has been back-filled. At about the same elevation but farther along the peninsula, are the vestiges of another structure. Two fragments of walls on the north and south sides of the site just protrude from the ground. The structure was built on a slope with a rock face behind it and might have originally measured six meters by six meters. Rounding the peninsula to its east side, about 50 meters above the level of the lake, is another ruin. This structure's outer dimensions measure eight meters by 3.8 meters and consists of two rooms. The walls of the smaller or north room attain a height of two meters outside and 1.7 meters inside. The south room has three niches inside; one in the north wall and two in the west wall. There may have been a third room to the south; structural extensions are visible.

The densest aggregation of structures is found on the east side of the peninsula not far from its base. We will survey them from south to north as if walking around the peninsula in a clockwise fashion. Oral and

textual indications point to these as having possibly belonged to the protohistoric Zhang zhung (Iron Age) period as could selected other ruins at Da rog mtsho.

Approximately 150 meters above the lake shore are structural remains. This structure, like others in the vicinity, is built of grayish red and grayish purple sandstone which were cemented together using a reddish brown mortar. The structure measures nine meters along its northeast wall (the wall facing directly to the lake) and 4.8 meters along its northwest wall. The finely built walls of small sandstone blocks do not now exceed 1.5 meters in height. The extent of the southwest and southeast walls is unclear and much of the structure has been back-filled with earth and rubble. The southwest wall was built into the slope, a common technique among the structures in the proximity.

The structure appears to have been multi-roomed. The most intact room is in the northwest corner and its interior dimensions are 2.3 meters by 1.9 meters. Against the northwest wall of this room is an entablature about 1.3 meters long and one half meter tall (Fig.13). The top of it is constructed of stone slabs, the largest of which measures 60 x 50 cm. The central support of the entablature divides the interior space into two compartments bounded by the side walls. Adeptly constructed it has lost its mud plaster and mortar and subsequently subsided.<sup>28</sup> The partition wall dividing the northwest room from its northeast neighbor and other rooms to the south is clearly seen, however, the other walls of the northeast room are far less preserved.

Continuing north towards the base of the peninsula but at a higher elevation (not much below the summit) is another ruin. Its lakeside wall is 7.75 meters long and around one half meter thick, but due to the deterioration of the structure its width could not be determined. Its extant walls do not exceed 1.2 meters in height. It appears to have been partitioned into two rooms. In the southeast room a niche was built into one of the walls.

Farther along and at a lower elevation, are the remains of a structure whose exterior walls measure seven meters (northeast/lake side wall) by 3.8 meters (southeast and northwest walls) which also consisted of two rooms (with the possible inclusion of a third room on the southeast side—there is an extension of the foundation walls in this direction). Existing walls are one to 1.2 meters in height.

Immediately adjacent to this previous structure in the same geographical alignment is a solid structure built using the same type of expert stone work. Its exterior dimensions are 5.7 meters by 1.8 meters. The flat blocks of sandstone used in construction are up to 70 cm in length and are cemented together using that reddish brown mortar common to all the

sites in the vicinity. At the ends of the structure are the remains of two *bum pa*-like structures which are a maximum of two meters tall. It does appear that this was a *mchod rten* complex.

Approximately 30 meters farther towards the base of the peninsula and at a little lower elevation is another ruin which measures approximately six meters by six meters. Its walls have been nearly leveled except for the rear wall (southwest wall) which was built partially into the slope. One niche survives in it.

A little further along and at a slightly higher elevation than the previous structure, is the largest ruin found on the north shore of Da rog mtsho (Fig.14). Its lakeside foundation is 18 meters in length and the structure measures 7.5 meters wide (northwest and southeast sides). Its rear wall is 13 meters long (its front foundation wall extends beyond the structure, which probably functioned to stabilize the slope). Much of the rear wall extends below the ground level.

The building consists of a verandah or anteroom overlooking the lake and running the length of the structure, with three rooms behind. The walls are around one half meter thick in most areas except the corners which are thicker. It is built in the same fashion as the surrounding structures—courses of flat sandstone blocks placed in parallel rows. The exterior verandah wall is 2.5 meters tall from the level of the slope, however, its upper reaches do not appear original—they are of poorer quality workmanship. Standing on the verandah this wall extends about one meter upwards, therefore the landing of the verandah is about 1.5 meters above the level of the slope facing the lake. The verandah is approximately 2.75 meters wide but is not of uniform dimensions because the front wall of the three rooms is not straight.

Behind the verandah is the front (northeast) wall of the three rooms. Much of this wall is now 1.5 to two meters tall. There is a window built into the central room and a window in the north room opening onto the verandah.<sup>29</sup> The entranceway is via the central room but as the lintel is missing its original height could not be determined. The wall at the base of the doorway is 65 cm thick. Upon entering the central room the doorway to the northern room is immediately to the right. This doorway is also missing a lintel. The interior dimensions of the north wall are 2.1 meters (northeast and southwest walls) by 2.9 meters (northwest and southeast walls) and it is the smallest of the three rooms. There is a niche built into the rear wall. The window overlooking the landing is 33 cm tall and 42 cm wide. In the southeast wall is an opening leading to the central room which appears original because there is a long overhanging stone in place.

The interior dimension of the central room is 3.3 x 2.9 meters. There is a niche in the rear and southeast walls. The window overlooking the landing is 55 cm tall and 45 cm wide. The interior walls are still heavily mortared and there are traces of what appears to be mud plaster covering the stones of the wall. The lintel in the doorway between the south and central rooms is also missing.

The interior dimensions of the south room are four meters by 2.8 meters. The rear wall is interrupted by a boulder protruding into the interior space which evidently was part of the original interior ecology. There are two niches in the front wall. There also appears to have been a window in the southeast wall but the lintel and supporting masonry is missing.

What kind of roof the structure had is a mystery. The absence of large stone slabs and pillars laying about, and the spans involved, suggests that it was built with wooden rafters. There are however, no traces of wood detectable on the surface, a common state of affairs in ancient monuments.

Directly below the largest structure are the remains of walls at least six meters long on the lakeside. Sections of the front, rear and side walls are still intact. At a little lower elevation are the remains of what appears to have been a round structure. Its rear wall is less than one meter tall and built into the slope.

Approximately four meters north of the largest structure is another ruin. Its outer dimensions measure three meters by four meters. The entrance is in the southeast (there is no lintel extant) and from it one descends about one half meter to the floor level. Interior walls extend more than two meters upwards from the floor. A niche was built into the rear (southeast), northwest and northeast walls.

Directly below the previous structure is a ruin with rounded corners measuring three meters across built against a rock outcropping. The entrance is in the east. There was a possible eastern extension of the ruin as evidenced by structural remains in this direction. Some of the mortars used to build the walls are visible. Interior walls stand up to 1.5 meters above the ground level.

Approximately seven meters to the south are scant structural remains measuring roughly three meters by two meters. Adjacent to this structure is a well constructed *mani* wall with plaques predominantly displaying the *mani* mantra. An alternative inscription reads: "Om a ma ra ni dzri wa ni ye sa ha' ka rma pa mkhyen no ta". It is engraved in the same ornamental style as the *mani* plaques. It demonstrates that the wall was constructed by devotees of the Ka rma bKa' brgyud sect. The Lung dkar dgon pa belongs to this sect for instance. The apogee of the bKa' brgyud pa in western Tibet occurred in the late 12th and early 13th centuries (Vitali, p.90). However, it is not at all clear how old the *mani* wall is. The plaques do

not display heavy wear. There is a shelter built into one part of the *mañi* wall which can comfortably accommodate one person.<sup>30</sup>

Moving closer to the base of the peninsula at a lower elevation is a much smaller *mañi* wall and the remains of a *mchod rten* which measures 2.7 meters at its base. While it was not razed during the Cultural Revolution, its contents have been ransacked. The *mchod rten* was built on a stone lined terrace and there is a retaining wall behind it, perhaps indicating that it was located at an earlier building site. Its *bum pa* is of the small type often found on Bonpo *mchod rten* but this feature alone is not sufficient to determine its religious identity. There is a niche in the north side of the base and *bum pa*. Like the other structures on the peninsula it was built of flat sandstone blocks. Traces of red and white paint can be detected on the plastered surface. If the extent of its plastered surface is an index of its age it is more recent than the proximate domiciliary ruins.

Below the *mchod rten* are scattered stones and a low lying mound—perhaps the remains of another archaeological site? Further along and near the level of the lake, are three more small *mañi* walls. At the base of the peninsula is a disused *nang ra* similar to one found at *mchod rten*. These abandoned structures may be generations old.

#### THE EASTERN HALF OF THE NORTH SHORE

At the next headland, which juts about one kilometer into the lake, are also signs of early human inhabitation along its east side. Approaching in a clockwise direction the first site consists of a wall about 28 meters long and one meter tall generally constructed of large rocks. In front of it (towards the beach) are the remains of a round structure about three meters across. Its rear wall is built up to a height of around 70 meters while its front wall is more or less flush with the ground. Continuing towards the base of the headland is an oval-shaped structure about three meters across. It may not be very old—similar structures are built today as day shelters for shepherds (in fact, at the base of this headland is such a shelter with the remains of a recent fire in it). Nearby is a semicircular-shaped structure about three meters across which was built against a cliff. The remains found on this headland seem to represent pastoral structures such as *ra ba* (enclosures for livestock and people) which have long been abandoned. In the vicinity, at the base of the headland, is a contemporary day transit camp corral built in the modern fashion: walls are constructed of single unmortared courses. On the summit of this low-lying headland are the remains of what appears to be a cairn.

To the east of this last headland a series of escarpments run much of the length of the north shore. These are interrupted in four places by intervening valleys in which run intermittent streams. Passing about one

dozen raw caves in the shoreline escarpment, one comes to the mouth of a valley. Near its dry creek bed are three small *mani* walls. East of this valley one finds a large *mani* inscription, and one small niche in the escarpment has a wall built around it, as if something is enshrined here (does not appear to be pastoral). Above this stretch of the escarpment a large rocky knob sticks out of a shelf. This formation has a large cleft in it which is used as a seasonal encampment. Further east two highly weathered walls are curiously perched in the cliff. Their function is enigmatic.

One now comes to the mouth of the sMan phug stod ma valley which supports two homesteads situated well away from the lake-shore. At the east side of the mouth of this valley at the foot of the escarpment, is a modern seasonal pastoral encampment. *Tshang* for kids and lambs were constructed, and the caves here have recently built walls (less substantial and cruder than the old walls, as well as being unmortared). Above this camp on a shelf are the remains of a *mani* wall with a few highly worn plaques. Higher up on another shelf appears to be a very old pastoral camp. A heavily built foundation wall about 15 meters long bounding a level area is visible, as well as what might be the remnants of a *mani* wall measuring three meters by 2.5 meters.

The escarpment continues until it is interrupted by the sMan phug bar ba valley. East of this valley is a beach with naturally polished stones. The beach-line caves, niches and overhangs appear to be too close to the water level to have had ancient significance.

Further east at a place called Tshams do dmar ri, a purplish red headland, is the site of what appears to be an old pastoral camp.<sup>31</sup> First one encounters the remains of two sets of walls surrounding a cave. About 50 meters farther are the remnants of a wall built around a cliff which seems to have created an enclosure roughly three meters square. However, the wall is in disarray making determination of its original configuration impossible from a visual survey. Farther along the beach are two more walled caves but they may be of relatively recent construction. In front of them appears to be the remains of a corral measuring three meters by six meters. It appears to have been abandoned for many years. Adjacent to it is a more massively built corral 4.5 meters square, and behind it, the remains of several foundation walls. These structures may have once supported roofs because: 1) walls are doubly coursed and uniform; and 2) they appear to have been mortared. Behind these foundation walls is a walled cave about seven meters deep. From its entrance (now without a lintel) three steps lead down to two rooms. The walls of the cave are soundly built and mortared but are more roughly constructed than the cave shelters at 'Phrang lam.

On a shelf above the old encampment are what may be the remains of a small *mchod rten*. Nearby is a modern corral and day shelter. Behind them against the escarpment is another corral which is used for horses. Also on the shelf are three small *maṇi* walls: one round, one square and one that flanks both sides of a boulder.

Further east along the beach is the permanent settlement of Gun las. It is unique on the north shore of Da rog mtsho in that it is in close proximity to the lake, and the two families who live here still reside in tents. Gun las is located on the lake-shore in the manner of the ancient settlement patterns, however, it is built at the modern beach level. Without exception the old sites are located at a higher level from the lake.

East of Gun las is a mountain apparently named sKyung mo (Female Chough) overlooking Da rog mtsho. At the foot of this mountain is a foundation wall 48 meters long and 85 cm thick. It was skillfully built but not exactly in a straight line. While it may be the vestiges of a corral, it is much more skillfully and formidably built than a proximate modern corral.

On the lower flanks of sKyung mo ri are a couple of caves. If one scurries up the steep slopes from these caves a series of unusual walls are encountered. These may be related in function to the two walls west of sMan phug stod ma. Built on the edge of a cliff and overlooking the lake are five walls with no obvious utilitarian function. They were clearly built in the most exposed locations and were skillfully constructed. The walls exhibit no sign of superstructures or other architectural appendages. They are heavily worn and have climax lichens growing on them. The 'brog pas of Gun las know nothing of their identity save that they are "very old" nor evidently, has any of the ancient lore of the mountain survived. The five structures are most distinctive when viewed from below where they can be seen in their entirety.

The most exposed of the walls is located in the west and superficially resembles a *maṇi* wall. It is three meters long and 90 cm wide. One of its narrow ends is built into the slope while the opposite side juts over the cliff and is about one meter tall. The second wall is about 1.5 meters tall but more in profile with the cliff, thus only its south or lake side is exposed. The third wall is also built flush into the cliff and only its lake side is visible. It is about 1.2 meters tall. The fourth wall in the series is the largest—about seven meters on its south and east sides. Its other sides are integrated into the slope. The fifth wall is about one meter tall and its lake-side wall is two meters long.

Much higher up the precipitous slopes of sKyung ri sits on a ledge another wall which is about nine meters long and less than one meter tall. According to the 'brog pas of Gun las there is a third similarly constructed wall on the summit of sKyung ri. As I can find no physical reason as to

why so much time and labor has been devoted to these inaccessible structures, I can only conclude that they had a ritual or ceremonial function. However, they do not have the characteristics of *maṇi* walls.

#### COG PU RDO RING

East of sKyung mo ri is another distinctive mountain named rGyal sgo ri. To the east of rGyal sgo ri is a cave with prayer flags suspended in it and dabs of butter, human hair, wool thread, tufts of white wool and blessed cords attached to the rock. As no one was in the vicinity, I never learned the identity of this shrine. Near the northeast corner of Da rog mtsho but set back a couple kilometers from the lake shore is a settlement which I believe is named Chus rus.

On the east side of the lake a huge wall about 150 meters long and as much as two meters wide and two meters tall, was constructed. Large seasonal encampments are located on its east or leeward side. Was it constructed specifically to give shelter to the shepherds and their livestock? I presume that it is a modern structure but there was no one in the vicinity from whom I could inquire.

Cog pu rdo ring is located in the Cog pu valley approximately eight kilometers east of Da rog mtsho (Fig.15). It consists of a stele about one meter tall but at one time it was taller. However, the break occurred a long time ago as it has been eroded smooth. The stele sits in an enclosure seven meters by four meters consisting of a finely crafted foundation wall constructed along the perimeter. Locals I spoke with knew nothing of its identity save that it is "very old." My initial assessment is that Cog pu rdo ring is an ancient funerary site.<sup>32</sup> The characteristics of a stele set within an enclosure warrants such a view.<sup>33</sup> For example, the royal tombs at 'Phyong phu mda' are associated with stelae.<sup>34</sup>

#### Notes

1. While I have not yet found any direct correspondence between the archaeological sites at Da rog mtsho and the recently discovered cave sites at Glo sMon thang, 250 kilometers to the south, a brief mention of them is warranted given their potential importance to Zhang zhung civilization. There is evidence of human occupation in a cave system found in the Muktinath valley from circa 200 B.C. to 1300 A.D., and artifacts found in the Chokhopani funerary caves have been dated to circa 800 B.C. For more information see *Ancient Nepal*, nos.130-133 and 136.
2. g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan aged 80, practiced as a traditional physician in Byang thang for several years. He visited both gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho on his way to Da rog mtsho. At Da rog mtsho he became aware of extensive ruins and caves which according to the local residents had been

long abandoned. Familiar with Bon literature, g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan originally wanted to go to the big island at Da rog mtsho where Tsod min gyer (sNang bzher lod po) meditated but, he had no way to get there as his visit coincided with the summer season. He settled instead for Sha ba gdong lha khang, another site at the lake associated with sNang bzher lod po. g.Yung drung rgyal mtshan now resides at Dolanji in Himachal Pradesh.

By contrast, the information about the ancient heritage of Da rog is not so detailed among the Buddhists, even from those who hail from the area. Tshe ring chos 'phel of gZhung pa ma mtshan, popularly known as mNga' ris A zhang, aged 63, is an expert on the history and culture of the 'brog pa. He reports that Da rog mtsho was an important part of Zhang zhung. bSam grub rgyal mtshan, aged 59, was born at Da rog mtsho. Growing up, he was aware of the ancient habitations but has no information on their identity. According to Pho dbang phyug, aged 81, a well known spirit-medium, himself from Da rog mtsho, the structures on the north shore of the lake belonged to the ancient Bonpos. A story was told to him of some sickly sheep being kept in the old ruins over the winter, a certain death sentence, but when the herders returned in the spring time they found that the animals were unusually powerful. This tale underlines the magical aura, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, surrounding ancient habitations. Pho dbang phyug connects the north shore of the lake with the local cycle of the Gling Ge sar epic. An ally of Ge sar's and an emanation of dMag zor rgyal mo, A thog klu mo, is said to have stored her weapons in a cave she created at the lake called Lha mo mdung shubs (Spear Sheath of the Goddess). As a reward for slaying a black yak demon which had murdered her father, A thog klu mo presented Ge sar with a necklace of gzi. Ha na aged 69, is also originally a 'brog pa from Da rog mtsho. As a youth he heard from his elders that the ruins at the lake were the remains of extensive ancient Bon settlements. A legend is told of the Bonpos returning to the area after a trading trip and being served tea by an elderly woman. In her haste, after drawing water, the woman forgot to put the lid on the well causing an enormous flood which dislodged the Bonpo from the area. Ha na once visited the big island at Da rog mtsho, mTsho gling, in the winter where he saw the Bon ruins there. 'Bo dkar Rin po che mKhyen rab of 'Bo dkar monastery in mTsho chen county (located about 70 kms. from Da rog mtsho) and now residing in Darjeeling, also attributes the ruins on the north side of Da rog mtsho to the Bonpos. According to him, one group of these ruins is known as Mon rdzong. The Mon are a semi-legendary people who inhabited a wide swath of the Himalayan rimland in ancient times. All information recorded here was obtained in personal interviews. I conducted my interview with mNga' ris A zhang in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, on March 16, 1998, and Pho dbang phyug, Ha na and bSam grub rgyal mtshan between June 18 and 20 at the Hiyangja Tibetan Refugee camp in Pokhara, Nepal; finally 'Bo dkar Rin po che on August 21 and 22 in gZhis ka rtse.

3. Parallels between Da rog mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho are clear in that both lakes have oral histories that speak of a more extensive infrastructure

and denser population in ancient times. Moreover, there is archaeological evidence to support such an assumption. Da rog mtsho is similar to gNam mtsho in that the majority of archaeological sites are located on headlands along the north shore giving them a southern exposure. For data on the Archaeology of Dang ra g.yu mtsho and gNam mtsho see Bellezza 1996 and Bellezza 1997.

4. A preference for east-facing thresholds is still found in Tibetan culture in the entranceways of *'brog pa* tents, and Tibetan houses and monastic buildings.
5. The tiny settlement (two households) at Gun las is the only inhabitation exhibiting ancient patterns of settlement in that it is located directly on the lake-shore.
6. This goddess belongs to the *smam mo* or *klu mo* class of indigenous deities. A modern invocational text devoted to her is entitled *Da rogs g.yu mtsho gsol kha*. It belongs to the Kar ma bka' brgyud monastery Lung dkar bsam gtan byang chub gling. I have translated this text in my report for the Shang Shung Institute.
7. As Do gyi phug is a rocky headland, there are only the most minimal traces of modern pastoral activity.
8. This stone has been identified as quartzitic sandstone. At Do gyi phug it is red in color.
9. The structures at Do gyi phug (as well as near mTsho do) are generally built of thin dressed sandstone blocks intricately crafted into walls.
10. The mortar used is reddish brown in color. As an indication of age it should be analyzed for organic content. This work could begin with the formation of a Sino-American Archaeological team. The head of the American team, Professor Mark Aldenderfer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has reported (in personal communication) that he plans on focusing on Byang thang sites. In 1997 the Sino-American Archaeologists worked in Gu ge surveying the monastic sites of Lo tswa ba Rin chen bzang po.
11. At Cog pu, a *'brog pa* settlement east of Da rog mtsho, round stone sheds are constructed measuring about 1.5 to two meters in height and two meters in diameter, which are used for storage. These, however, have wooden or metal rafters. Contemporary stone sheds are also found at many other places in Byang thang and southern Tibet. In 'Brong pa county beehive-shaped sheds are also found. As a rule, these contemporary structures are not as adroitly constructed as the Bonpo variety at Da rog mtsho.
12. Rooms with stone rafters are also found at Phyug 'tsho grog po rdzong in Dang ra g.yu mtsho.
13. A rock painting made partially with white pigment is also found at Ra ma do, gNam mtsho.
14. According to the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang-zhung snyan rgyud* biographies Ta pi hri tsa practised for nine years at sTag thabs seng ge in the Ma mig region. In his youth he was a goat herder called Ta pi ra tsa. Ta pi in the Zhang zhung language is said to mean fair-complexioned.
15. The style of Ta pi hri tsa depicted with its three-lobed aureole and narrow waist connected to a substantial lower body appears to have its parallels in

the iconography of deities found on *tshwa tshwa* and *thog lcags* which I think can be attributed to the "later spread of the doctrine" and earlier.

16. The history of Bon in western Tibet is very scanty. The *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* by Ngag dbang grags pa records that King Ye shes 'od banned all practitioners of Bon but permitted a little proximity between the doctrines of Bon and Chos (Vitali, p.112). Personages such as Rin chen bzang po and Khyung po rNal 'byor originally belonged to Zhang zhung traditions but adopted the new tantricism spreading from India. Yar lung orchestrated persecutions of Bonpo resulted in them being driven from sTod. The Bonpos who remained in mNga' ris, the central Byang thang and Glo bo, were hermits practicing the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* transmitted through their lineage holders in an uninterrupted tradition from sNang bzher lod po. The upper (*stod*) and lower (*smad*) lineages of *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* were reformed by Yang ston shes rab rgyal mtshan (1077-1141). The establishment of Bon monastic communities belonging to the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* occurred after the early period of the "later spread of the doctrine." See Vitali, pp.220-227.
17. The syllable *om* found in this inscription (and in most of the other inscriptions at Lha khang dmar chag) is written in the Bon style which has a double *sna ro* sign.
18. A common practice in *mgon khang* (protector chapels) is the displaying of stuffed animals.
19. Butter and white wool are popular offerings left at sacred places.
20. These tiny shells must have come from Da rog mtsho which is rich in aquatic life.
21. The *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs* chapter of the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud* (p.277) records that on the west side of Grwa bye, Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po had a meditational place called Brag sha ba gdong. Five years later he returned to the island (mTsho do). This is clearly a reference to Da rog mtsho. For example, in the *'Bel gtam lung gi snying po* Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag refers to this place as Do brag sha ba can which is located at Dwa rog mtsho gling (p.49). The *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi rgyud pa'i bla ma'i rnam thar* mentions that dPon chen btsan po was from Da rog mtsho (p.36). His father is recorded as belonging to the Thog lha clan and named sKu gshen thog lha rtse mo, and his mother belonged to the Mang wer clan and her name was Za rgyan chung ma. The account adds that dPon chen btsan po went to Zang zang lha brag to receive teachings from dMu rgyal ba blo gros (p.36). Due to the sequence maintained in this text it is thought that sNang bzher lod po somewhat predates dPon chen btsan po. The *'Bel gtam lung gi snying po* tells us that dPon chen btsan po meditated at Dwa rog brag and rGyal ba blo gros at Dwa rog lcags phug (p.49). I have not been able to positively identify the last two places located at Da rog mtsho, however the former seems like a general name (of the north shore?).
22. McNeils deer is reportedly still found in 'Brong pa county but probably not north of the trans-Himalaya. The deer is an important sacred animal in Byang

thang and gives its name to many topographs located there. For example, Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *'Bel gtam lung gi snying po* records that sNang bzher lod po meditated at Sha ba brag in the sGo mang ru ba (as well as Da rog mtsho). This can be no other than Sha ba brag, a small Kar ma bKa' brgyud monastery located on the north side of Ring mtsho gung ma (near the Shan rtsa and dPal mgon county line). According to *'brog pa* of the area, two white deer are self-manifested in the cliff there, one male and one female. Sha ba brag monastery is associated with Mi la ras pa and his famous tale of giving shelter to a deer being pursued by a hunter but this tradition is apocryphal. We must consider the possibility that Sha ba brag was the site of an ancient deer cult which was inherited by Zhang zhung masters such as sNang bzher lod po—although this is far from clear, such may be the convolutions of Tibetan history.

23. Like the Bonpo sites at gNam mtsho and Dang ra g.yu mtsho, their counterparts at Da rog mtsho were built overlooking the lake. This is the common ecological factor although its cultural ramifications are not fully understood.
24. The planting of an upturned stone to mark the building sites of homes and monasteries is still a common practice in Tibet as well as an ancient one (i.e. *rdo ring* at mTshur phu).
25. An account of Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po's stay at mTsho do is recorded in the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi brgyud pa'i bla ma'i rnam thar* where it is referred to as mTsho gling gi do (pp.28, 29). The relevant account tells us:

sNang bzher lod po received *rdzogs chen* teachings from Tshe spungs zla ba rgyal mtshan at Ma mig, a place of white rocks located near Gra bye tshwa kha (just north of Da rog mtsho). sNang bzher lod po then came to Da rog mtsho, a place where sMan and many other spirits are gathered, to mTsho gling gi.do to practice. Along with his disciple he stayed on the island. At first they had sufficient supplies and food. At each meal sNang bzher lod po took a little food and stuck it to the rocks (as an offering).

One year the lake did not freeze and their food was exhausted. They survived by consuming the food left on the rocks, and again, at each meal sNang bzher lod po left a little food on the rocks. For a second year the lake did not freeze and the two men were reduced to consuming the food scraped from on the rocks. Altogether for three years they subsisted in this fashion. The disciple came to believe that they would perish. Thinking that he would die first the thought arose that possibly his master could subsist on his corpse. Testing his master's willingness to do so he went to sNang bzher lod po and told him that he had discovered a human corpse. sNang bzher lod po then asked him if he had touched it and he replied affirmatively. The master then directed him to make a circuit around the island, and upon doing so, he discovered the corpse of a *rkyang*. He told sNang bzher lod po about it who replied that they are prohibited from eating it as it would sully their practice. After a few days the disciple finds the corpse of a woman who had

died in childbirth and reports it to his master, who reminds him that they cannot eat it as it is among the forbidden meats (*shul chags kyi sha*).

Then sNang bzher lod po ordered his disciple to gather his belongings. The disciple wondered what was going on as there was no way off the island. When he was ready sNang bzher lod po ordered his disciple to close his eyes and hold on to him. They had travelled for a long time when the disciple remembered that he had forgotten to pack his flint. Opening his eyes he looked back to see a beautiful woman rolling up a strip of white woolen material. He then looked forward to see a similar woman rolling out a strip of white woolen material along their path. Upon seeing this the woman disappeared, and both men fell into the lake but they were close enough to the shore to land safely. They then met some local *'brog pa* who did not believe it was sNang bzher lod po because they thought he had died. The two men were not recognizable because of all they had suffered but by telling his old stories the *'brog pa* knew it was really sNang bzher lod po. At first they were given soup made from ashes (*thal chu*) to break the long fast and afterwards, the milk of a white goat and the milk of a white she-yak. After a few days they ate regular food and recovered their strength. sNang bzher lod po lived for 573 years.

The account of sNang bzher lod po now moves to his ability (through his practice he acquired great powers) to make magical bombs, the lesser of which he deployed to harm King Khri srong lde'u btsan (who had killed the King of Zhang zhung) (p.30). The stricken King Khri srong was forced to grant sNang bzher lod po boons and the right to practice *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.

In the *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs* an allusion to the island at Da rog mtsho is found set in the aftermath of King Khri srong's affliction (p.266): One hundred horsemen arrived at Grwa bye and inquired with the local shepherds as to the whereabouts of the Gyer spungs pa (sNang bzher lod po). They pointed to the foot of a white cliff located on an island and said that he had erected a tent there with the emblem of a white deer. The shepherds also told the cavalry that the Gyer spungs pa is able to manifest in many forms and that they must respect any unusual occurrences they might witness. The cavalry killed a horse and made boats from the hide. They then boarded boats and reached the island. Here they only found a silk carpet with the white crystal horn of a blue sheep placed on it. The cavalry made an offering of a wild yak horn filled with gold dust, and circumambulated and prostrated to the blue sheep horn. Instantaneously the blue sheep horn was transformed into the Gyer spungs pa. The soldiers informed him that the king was sick and pleaded for his life.

These literary accounts indisputably establish that sNang bzher lod po practiced *rdzogs chen* at an island in Da rog mtsho called mTsho gling gi do, the modern day mTsho do. We learn that the Gyer spungs pa erected a tent at the island and that he had dealings with local shepherds. No mention or allusion to sedentary communities or buildings is found in these accounts. Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin nram dag associates sNang bzher lod po with an

ascetic life style, one who practiced in caves, as is believed of many of the other *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* masters from his general time period. It is well established that a persecution of Bon leading to its abolition occurred during the reign of King Khri strong.

How then do the literary accounts square with the extensive ruins found at and near mTsho do? Firstly, I am not aware of Bon or Buddhist historical references to monasteries and hermitages being located at Da rog mtsho, and therefore, must tentatively conclude that these Bonpo sites (at least some of them) predate the abolition of Bon. This probably means that when sNang bzher lod po came to mTsho do in the second half of the eighth century the area was already in a state of ruin. If this hypothesis is correct the sites (or at least some of them) must belong to the Zhang zhung period and what may be examples of Iron Age civilization in Byang thang. We can only wait for an extensive archaeological survey of Da rog mtsho for textual studies alone cannot address the realities on the ground.

26. I could not visit mTsho do because the lake was not yet frozen and had to be contented with viewing it from the lake-shore with binoculars. The visible ruins form an aggregation of structures on a shelf above the east side of Da rog mtsho. It is certainly possible that there are other archaeological sites on the island that were out of the view of my field glasses.
27. I have not seen modern masonry work in Byang thang to rival that found on the big peninsula. What masonry work is carried out is usually done by masons from southern Tibet who specialize in working in Byang thang during the warmer part of the year.
28. This is the general state of things at the archaeological sites in the vicinity. After they were abandoned and especially after they lost their roofs (did they all have one?), the structures underwent a long process of disintegration whereby the plaster veneer (found on at least some structures) and the mortar cementing the walls was eroded and washed away. As the mortar deteriorated spaces were created between the courses of stones allowing the structures to subside. What is most noteworthy is how intact some of the walls still are after what appears to be many centuries of abandonment.
29. In many early temples of Tibet structures are windowless. I am, therefore, not certain of the cultural context of this architectural feature.
30. *Mani* walls with shelters built into them are found in Rub zhu.
31. A visual survey of a site is of course, never sufficient in itself to date an archaeological site. It must be corroborated by scientific evidence. However, the weathering of the stones, deterioration of the walls, climax lichen, construction techniques, as well as the oral and literary histories of the region are the only indications we have available at present. The scholarly jury must remain out until we can provide the necessary archaeological data and really come to terms with the heritage that Da rog mtsho offers us.
32. Alternatively, stones (*rdo ring*) are erected in Tibet with the following functions: 1) as a royal monument alluding to great deeds; 2) to mark the establishment of a building site (both an ancient and modern custom); 3) as border markers; 4) as shrines to indigenous deities and; 5) to produce walls

for corrals etc. The morphology of these alternate types of *rdo ring* does not fit the Cog pu site.

33. In mTsho chen county I found three *rdo ring* sites of a similar morphology called *srid pa chags pa'i rdo ring* (the begotten stelae of existence) which refers to their supposed primordial character. According to legend they were formed at the beginning of the universe and represent the founding of human civilization. They are located in a 15 kilometer radius at Mer btum pis ma (Fig.16), Mer btum phyug mo and 'O ma tshe ring. At Mer btum pis ma and 'O ma tshe ring there are three stelae located within a rectangular stone perimeter. At Mer btum pis ma there are also a series of tumuli which are probably funerary in nature (See Bellezza, 1999).
34. According to G. Tucci the pillars at the royal tombs of 'Phyong phu mda' functioned to subdue the *sa bdag* and *klu* and symbolized the axis mundi perforating the planes of existence (as well as being a symbol of the "law" as identified with the king).

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FIG. 1



FIG. 2

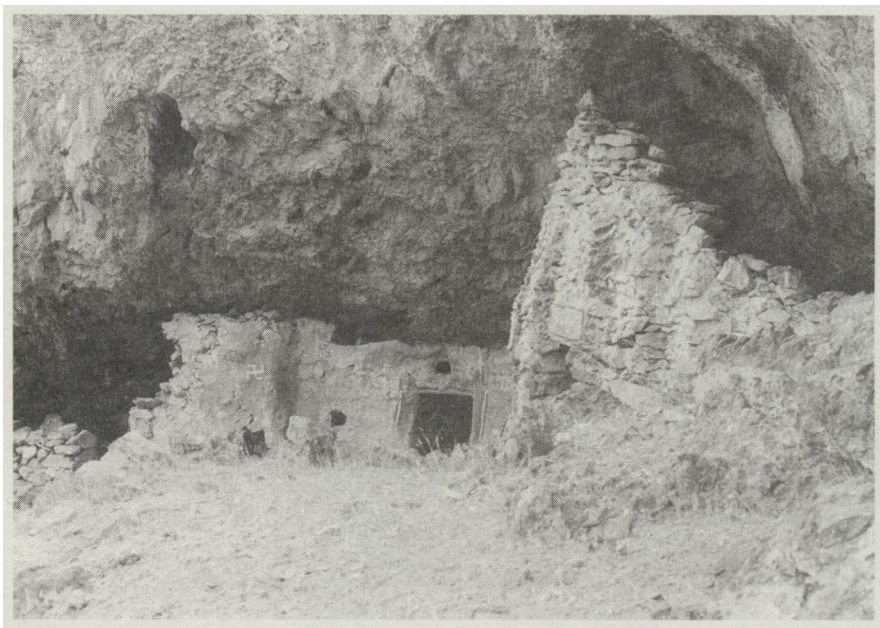


FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5

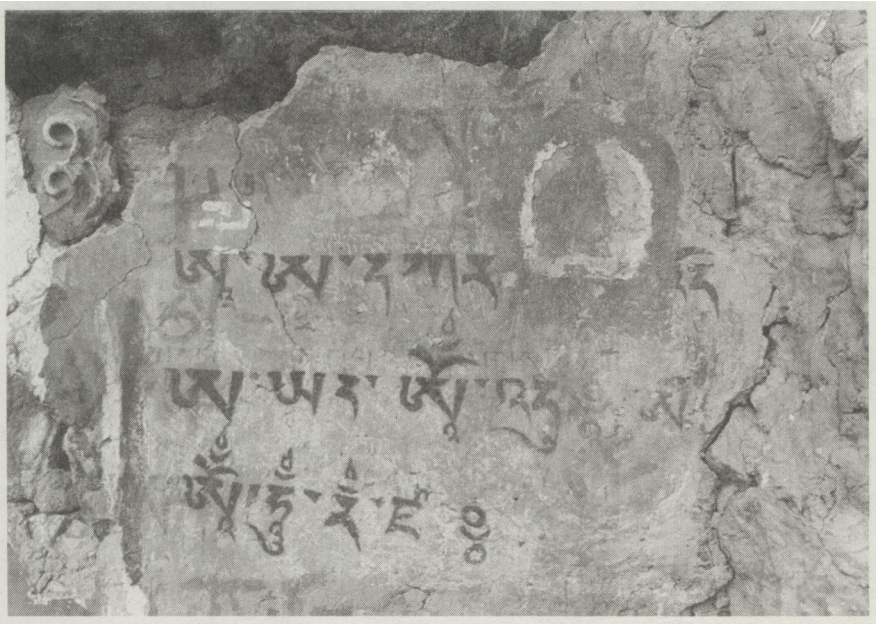


FIG. 6

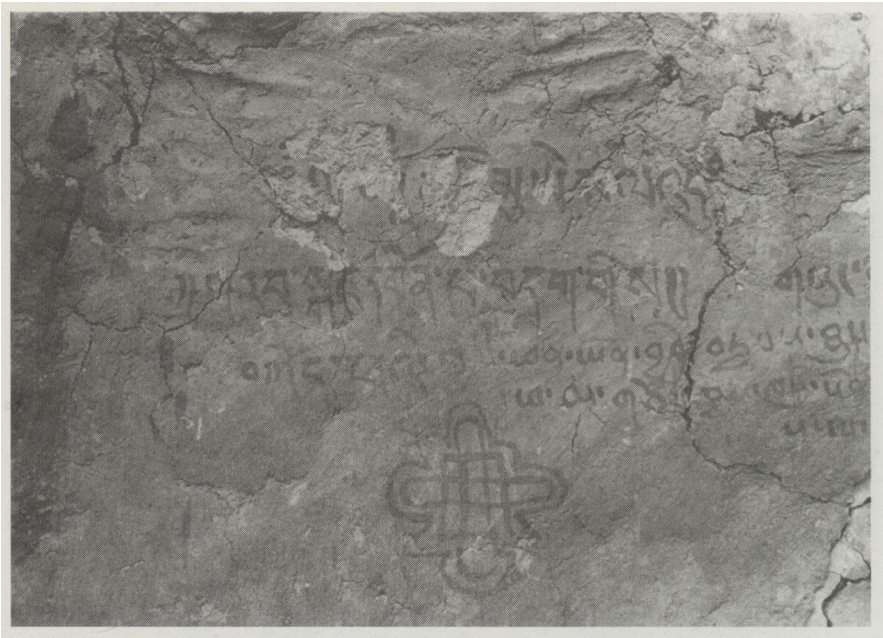


FIG. 7

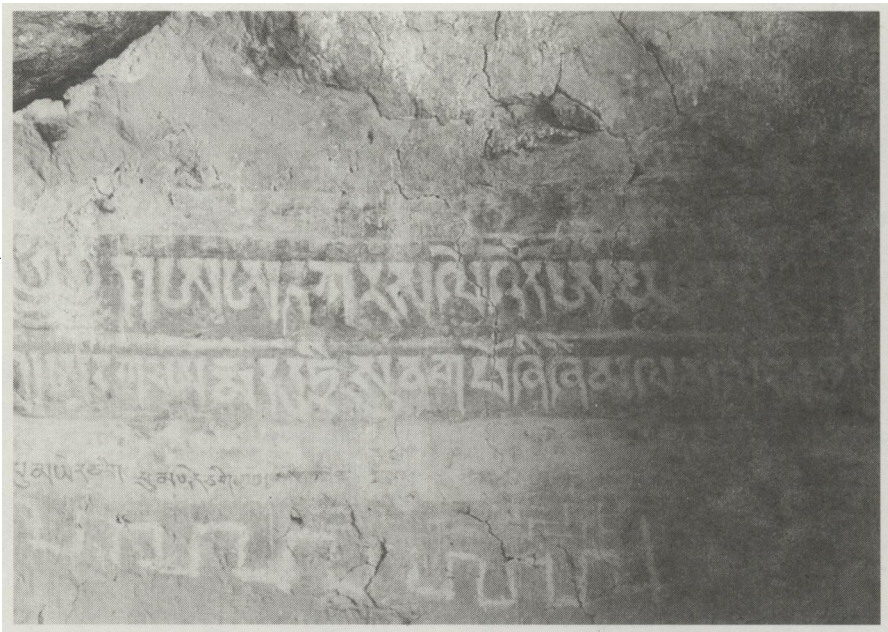


FIG. 8

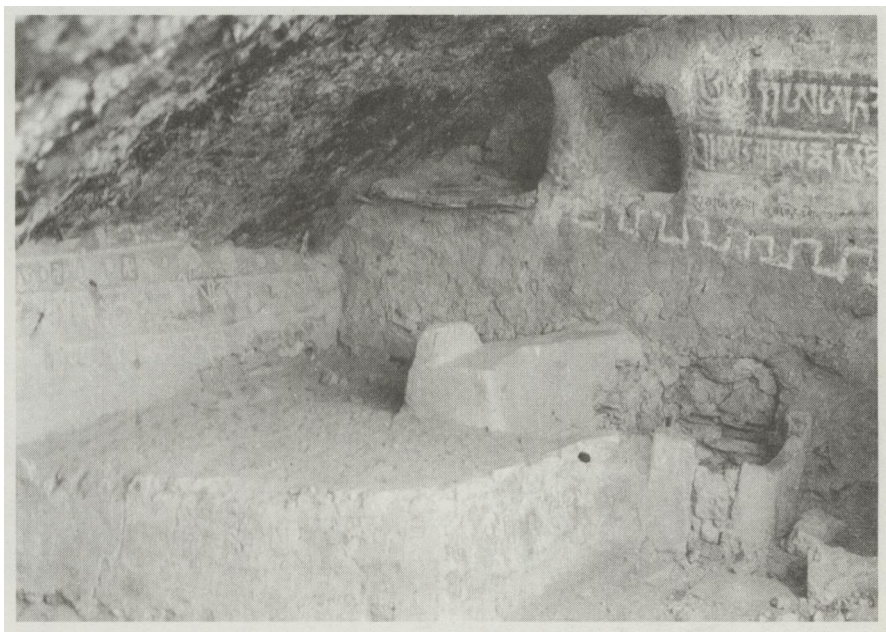


FIG. 9

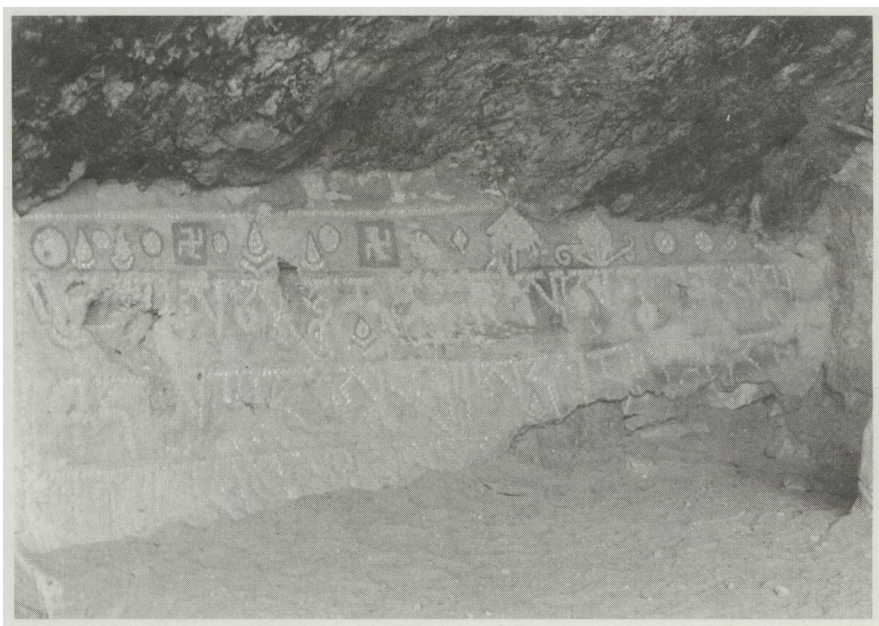


FIG. 10

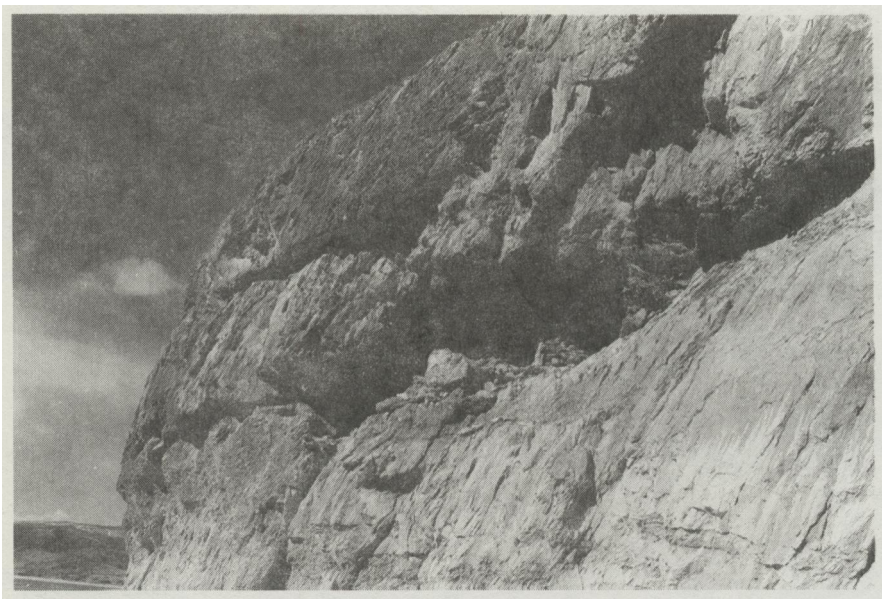


FIG. 11

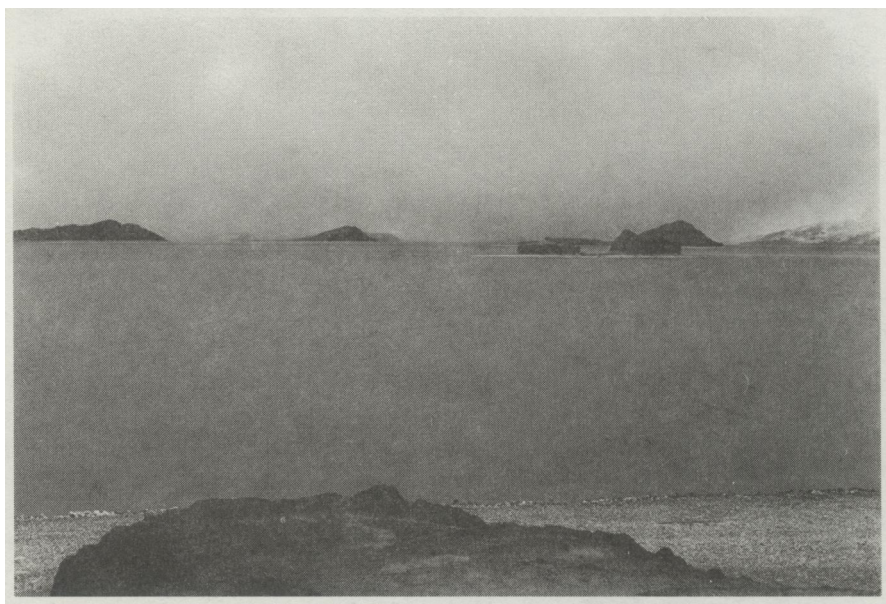


FIG. 12



FIG. 13



FIG. 14



FIG. 15



FIG. 16

