Ancient Petroglyphs of Ladakh: New Discoveries and Documentation

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Although Ladakh appears relatively isolated today, it was for hundreds of years a transport corridor for traders and pilgrims moving between South and Central Asia. These travellers, together with Ladakh’s early inhabitants, left their marks in the form of the thousands of petroglyphs—figures or symbols pecked and chiselled into rock surfaces—that are scattered across the region. Many of the most interesting petroglyphs are to be found on or near the main transport routes, for example near the sites of bridges or river crossings. They constitute Ladakh’s oldest art form.

Figure 1.1 Rock with petroglyph images of people and animals beside the river Indus near Domkhar. Photo by the author.
As will be seen, the first scholarly references to petroglyphs date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the study of Ladakhi rock art remains in its infancy, first because earlier studies have documented no more than a small fraction of the petroglyphs that survive, and secondly because there remain many challenges of interpretation.

This article draws on more than fifteen years of research to document the petroglyphs of Ladakh in both well-known and newly discovered sites. It begins with a brief overview of earlier research in Ladakh and neighbouring regions before presenting a small sample of Ladakhi petroglyphs arranged by theme. The petroglyphs are illustrated with tracings and a selection of photographs. As will be seen, their dating remains a challenge. However, many of the images that I have selected date back to the prehistoric era, well before the introduction of Buddhism into the region.

Earlier Studies of Rock Art in Ladakh and Neighbouring Regions

The Moravian missionary August Herman Francke (1870–1930) was the first Western scholar to write about Ladakhi rock art in two journal articles written in 1902 and 1903. In accordance with his historical interests, Francke was primarily interested in textual rock inscriptions, but also noted drawings of animals, stupas, hunting scenes, and what appeared to be local deities in and around Khalatse in Lower Ladakh and in Zangskar. Giuseppe Tucci rediscovered much of the rock art identified by Francke on the route between Leh, Alchi and Khalatse during his 1935 expedition: a selection of his photographs was republished by Giacomella Orofino (1990). In view of the damage caused by recent road-building operations along this route, these photographs constitute a valuable historical record.

Since the 1990s there has been increasing interest in the rock art of the region. Vohra (1993, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2005) made several reports from Lower Ladakh and Nubra. Fonia (1993) reports on rock art as well as Paleolithic and Neolithic sites from Ladakh. Mani (1998–1999) reports on rock art from Lower Ladakh, Nubra and Zangskar. Francfort et al. (1990, 1992) give a valuable analytical report of petroglyphs spreading from the interior regions of Zangskar to Leh and Lower Ladakh, and suggest a number of comparisons with other

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1 Karl Marx (1897), an earlier Moravian missionary, had earlier reported on the existence of petroglyphs in a travel account of a medical missionary tour near Achinathang.

2 See, for example, Plates 1–3 in Francke (1923).