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Images of Lost Civilization The Ancient Rock Art of Upper Tibet

by John Vincent Bellezza

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**the kyang,
 the wild ass of Tibet**

A rock art tradition found on the highest parts of the Tibetan plateau chronicles at least 3000 years of a fascinating but little known civilization. Centered in the northern and western regions of Tibet, the broad extent of this rock art is just now coming to light. The prehistoric phase of this tradition was produced by the same people who created the Zhang zhung kingdom in the period before Buddhist domination some 1400 years ago. These images in stone are one of our clearest windows into the nature of early civilization in Tibet and they are invaluable to our understanding of the pre-Buddhist economy, environment and religion.

Rock art, which includes pictographs (painted and chalked representations on rock surfaces) and petroglyphs (pecked, scratched and engraved figures in stone), provides us with graphic evidence of early Tibet for they were wrought by the very hand of her inhabitants. However, unlocking the meaning and significance of these ancient images is a complex, problem-ridden task, and in most cases it will always remain an open book. For no matter how refined the technology at our disposal becomes we cannot enter the minds of the creators and thus we can never satisfactorily know what motivated them to produce art in stone. Even basic questions pertaining to the age and identity of specific compositions remain difficult to address. Nevertheless, groups of scientists, particularly those affiliated with the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (see their journal: *Rock Art Research*, Melbourne), utilizing sophisticated scientific tools and techniques, are hard at work attempting answers worldwide.



**eight archaic stupas
 engraved in a row**

Nearly one hundred rock art sites in Upper Tibet have been discovered to date (60 of these sites are photographically documented in *Art of Tibetan Rock Paintings*, Sichuan People's Publishing House: 1994). During my expeditions to Upper Tibet (known in Tibetan as the Changthang and Tod regions) to study traces of pre-Buddhist civilization I too have documented a number of rock art sites. These sites were produced over more than three millennia and exhibit highly diverse subject matter and techniques of manufacture. In fact, so varied is this rock art that it is truly emblematic of the development of Tibetan

civilization from early times onwards. Beginning in the period when the inhabitants of Upper Tibet subsisted as big game hunters, rock art proceeds over time to document the arrival of the domestic horse, warfare and religious concerns. Later, with the advent of the Zhang zhung Iron Age culture in Tibet, the range of subjects becomes broader and starts to include familiar images such as the *stupa*, horned eagle (*kyung*) and flaming

jewels, albeit in forms that have long since become outdated.

By far the most common subject in Upper Tibet rock art are animal compositions linking it thematically with the Eurasian animal style. Eurasian animal art prevailed throughout the steppes in the First Millennium B.C.E, and is characterized by the vibrant, forceful depiction of animals. Even in more recent centuries rock art in Upper Tibet has been dominated by the portrayal of animals, mostly the hoofed ungulates. This can be partly explained in functional terms because even today the economy of this most austere part of the Tibetan plateau revolves around stockbreeding, while hunting remains a viable supplementary activity. The prominent depiction of animals can be further attributed to the role they have played in indigenous religious traditions, mythology, spirit-mediumship and lore surrounding the old clans of the region. The most common animal in Upper Tibet rock art is the wild yak or *drong*, a potent symbol of Tibet's distinct identity. Horses, mostly with mounted figures, are also common. Probably the full range of native ungulates (gazelle, antelope, argali, blue sheep and deer) are depicted, as well as carnivores, birds, fish and other animals. Animals are frequently portrayed in isolation or as the quarry of hunters but also in what are ostensibly magico-ritual compositions.



a carnivore with gaping jaws chasing an ungulate.



a hunting scene

The most widely depicted human figure in the rock art of Upper Tibet is the hunter both represented mounted on horses and on foot. The hunter's most common weapon is the bow and arrow but pikes and swords are also known. Figures locked in combat are found at certain sites, and in addition to the weapons mentioned above, they often have shields and perhaps helmets. Anthropomorphic figures that seem to portray priests and primitive deities are also part of the rock art tableau, although they are not especially common. Some of these

figures appear to be wearing horned or feathered headdresses and some of them may possess zoomorphic qualities (however, the rock art does not usually lend itself to fine anatomical or costume detail and so it is difficult to assess the characteristics of the compositions). These types of attributes are associated with Zhang zhung era religious practitioners as recorded in Bon literary sources. Additionally, human figures are shown in migration between camps, dancing, tending livestock and hoisting banners.

One of the most important findings I have made is that rock art sites in Upper Tibet are often located near pre-Buddhist archaeological monuments, particularly graves and hilltop structures. This association alludes to concentrations of populations that in ancient times not only constructed permanent habitations but who found artistic expression in the nearby rock formations. As we refine the tools employed in the study of pre-Buddhist civilization we will come to better understand the chronological and cultural dimensions of this association.

The selection of 25 petroglyphs and pictographs presented here were captured on film during one of my recent expeditions. They have been chosen for visual appeal as much as for content and are but a small sample of the rich rock art record of Upper Tibet. I hope



pictograph of an archaic style stupa

that these images will help cultivate an appreciation of ancient Tibet better know one of the world's great civilizations. The attribution of manufacture to the rock art specimens shown here was derived from contents, stylistic forms and physical characteristics of the petroglyph on a site by site basis. As always readers' comments are very much v

My heartfelt thanks to friends of the Philadelphia Meditation Center (Thera documentation of this rock art possible. I also wish to thank various gover the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China for aiding



composition of several caprids



petroglyph of a yak

comp



pictograph of three flaming jewels



figure of a deer

a p



an ambulatory individual



hunting composition of several deer and drong

pic



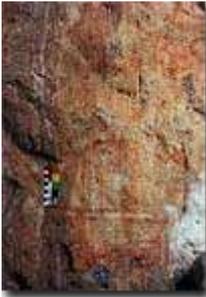
a horned eagle or khyung



a mounted archer and a hunter on foot attacking wild yaks



an early style Bon stupa



an early Bon stupa



a horseman in close pursuit of a drong



Carvings of archaic stupas



carved boulder of a lone horseman



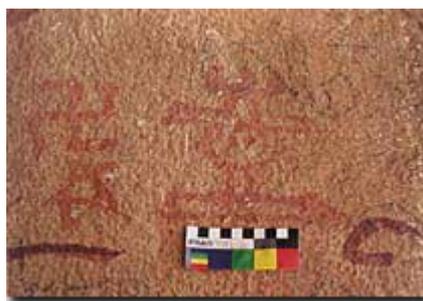
a group of animals and anthropomorphs



a mounted archer confronting a huge drong



a pre-Buddhist cultural theme



an ancient Bon monument



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