

# The Rock Art of Spiti A General Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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 The present article reviews the rock art of Spiti as a tool for understanding its early cultural history. Spiti (*Spi ti / Spyi ti*) is a valley system situated on the western edge of the Tibetan plateau, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Until recently, very little had been written about Spiti's cultural history prior to the Buddhist renaissance of the late 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

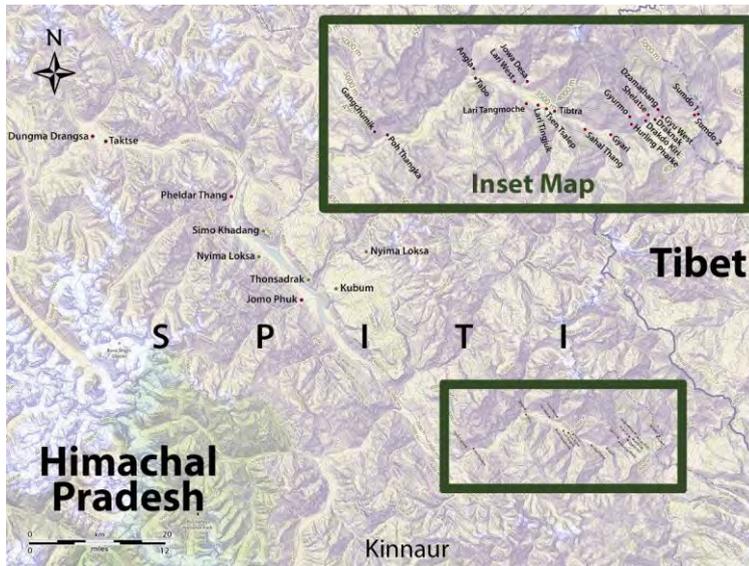
Spiti is sandwiched between the Great Western Himalaya range and Transhimalayan ranges bounded by the Pare Chu River on the north, south and east. Spiti is centered around 32° 30' North Latitude, some 2500 km from the eastern extremity of the Tibetan plateau. The climate of Spiti is arid and continental, with cold snowy winters and dry warm summers.<sup>2</sup> The villages of Spiti are situated between 3,140 meters and 4430 meters in elevation.

The people of Spiti enjoy an ancient culture and language closely related to those of Western Tibet. The population of Spiti is relatively homogenous and of a Bodic ethnic makeup (there are, however, several caste distinctions). It is this shared heritage that has drawn Spiti and Western Tibet into the same circle of kindred relations.

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<sup>2</sup> On the physical and political geography of Spiti, see Kapadia 1999: 25–32.



Map of the rock art sites of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh, India.  
Map by Brian Sebastian and John Vincent Bellezza.

One of the earliest known references to Spiti in Tibetan literature appears in a 13<sup>th</sup> century CE historical text, *lDe'u chos 'byung*, where it is listed as part of Zhang Zhung, a sovereign kingdom until the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>3</sup> However, there is also a much earlier rock inscription located in the northwestern Tibet region of Ruthok (*Ru thog*) that mentions the 'District of Spiti' (*Spyi ti sde*) in conjunction with the personal name of its maker.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the early cultural history of Spiti as derived from Tibetan literature and ethnographic study, see Bellezza 2015b.

<sup>4</sup> On this inscription see Bellezza 2008, pp. 186, 187; 2016a, fig. 58. The inscription is preceded by a clockwise swastika, which serves to emphasize the momentousness of what is written and illustrates that it was composed under the auspices of Buddhism. It reads: *spyi ti sde myang rmang la snang* (ln. 2) *gis bris khyung po* (ln. 3) {*tha*} *chun* (= *chung*) *gyis brgyis* (mod. = *bgyis*) *pa'o* ("Written by Myang rmang la snang of the *Spyi ti* district. Done by the youngest Khyung po"). The accomplishment referred to in the third line appears to be the carving of two ritual thunderbolts (not visible in the image), heralding a Buddhist occupation, at least in an abstract or legalistic sense. The inscription includes reference to the Spiti (*Spyi ti*) district (*sde*), one of five districts constituting Lower (Smad) Zhang Zhung, a crucial part of the territorial holdings of the Tibetan empire (for details, see Bellezza 2015b). This epigraphic reference to Spiti is by far the earliest one known, preceding by roughly 400 or even 500 years mention in the well-known 13<sup>th</sup> century CE historical text, *Lde'u chos 'byung*.



*Fig. 1 — A rock face chronicling Buddhist influences in northwestern Tibet during the Imperial period. It is situated on an ancient east-west route between agricultural regions of the far west (Stod) and the pastoral Changthang. Carved in a conspicuous location, this inscription contains the earliest known reference to the region of Spiti.*

On the Spiti Antiquities Expedition (May and June, 2015) my team and I attempted to document every single ancient rock carving and painting in the region (see Bellezza 2015a). While falling short of this ambitious goal, we documented approximately 1400 boulders with 6000 individual petroglyphs in lower Spiti.

Additionally, four parietal sites with some 180 red ochre pictographs were surveyed. Uniform sets of rock art data were collected in Spiti including GPS location, size, technique of production, orientation, and inclination of rock surface of individual carvings and paintings.

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This is borne out by the 'square style' of the Ruthok inscription, a paleographic tradition associated with pillar edicts and official correspondence of the Tibetan Imperial period (circa 650–850 CE). The inscription also notes the Khyung po/pho clan. This large and highly influential clan had a dominant political function in western Tibet in the Imperial period, as demonstrated by both epigraphic and textual sources. The inscription establishes that the Khyung po clan was probably indigenous to Spiti during the Imperial period; several other early epigraphs in Ruthok appear to extend its distribution to this region as well.



Fig. 2 — Searching for boulders with rock art on the Spiti Antiquities Expedition, Drakdo Kiri.

### *Previous studies*

The first report of petroglyphs in Spiti was made more than a century ago by Francke (1914: 37-8), who stated that below the village of Lari and in Tabo there are many rock carvings, particularly those of ibex and swastikas that may be pre-Buddhist. A couple decades later, Tucci (1936: 48) reported that prehistoric figures of humans and ibexes were engraved on big rock faces on the side of the trail below Kunzam La. Tucci (*ibid.*) remarked that these petroglyphs were of the same type as those studied by Francke in Ladakh (*La dwags*). The rock art described by Tucci appears to have been destroyed by modern road construction. More recently, Thakur (2001; 2008), Handa (2001), Chauhan *et al.* (2014) have conducted preliminary studies of rock carvings in Spiti.

### *Locational characteristics*

Lower Spiti boasts one of the densest concentrations of petroglyphs (rock carvings) in the entire Tibetan cultural sphere, but now suffering massive destruction (see below). There are also petroglyphs, pictographs and bas relief carvings of ancient *stūpas* in Upper Spiti. In July 2015, two additional rock art sites were discovered in the region by the Spiti Rock Art and Historical Association, which made copies of photographs of them available to me.

The petroglyphic sites of lower Spiti contain more than 95% of all rock art in the region. These sites are located in close proximity to the Spiti River. With just two exceptions, the rock carvings of Spiti occur on individual boulders ranging in size from 50 centimeters to over 4 meters in length. According to Thakur (2008: 28), these boulders are of granite, gneiss, schist, *etc.* The boulders are strewn across benches, terraces and flats suspended above the Spiti River.

All rock carving sites in the main Spiti valley straddle long-established pathways. Thus, ancient rock art and lines of communication went hand in hand. While some of these locations may have been the focus of hunting expeditions, especially in the winter, it appears they were chosen primarily for their visibility and frequency of usage. These locations are similar to those of Ladakh, of which the largest concentrations are along the Indus River. Rock art sites in Upper Tibet (*Stod* and *Byang-thang*) are not located in major river valleys, but rather in smaller valleys and near lakeshores.<sup>5</sup>

Two of the 24 sites of petroglyphs associated with Lower Spiti (*Spi ti gsham*) are actually seated in the district of Kinnaur, on the right side of the Spiti valley, but rock art there is closely related to that in Spiti proper. There are just two petroglyphic sites in Upper Spiti (*Spi ti stod*) consisting of a lone boulder each. Two sites of bas relief carvings of *chortens* (*mchod rten* / Sanskrit: *stūpa*) have also been discovered in Upper Spiti. Additionally, there are four sites with significant red ochre rock art in the upper portion of Spiti.

Three of these pictographic sites are located in high, out-of-the-way places, therefore, contrasting with the locational characteristics of petroglyphs in Lower Spiti.

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<sup>5</sup> Major works on rock art in Upper Tibet include Chayet 1994; Chen Zhao Fu 2006; Francfort *et al.* 1992; Li Yongxian 2004; Suolang Wangdui (Bsod-nams dbang-'dus) 1994; Bellezza 1997; 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2008; Bruneau and Bellezza 2013. On the rock art of Ladakh, see some of the above as well as Francke 1902; 1903; 1914; De Terra 1940; Mani 1998; Vernier 2007; Bruneau 2013; 2011; 2010; Bruneau *et al.* 2011; Bruneau and Vernier 2010; Aas 2009; Thsangspa 2014.



Fig. 3 — Anthropomorph and swastika, Nyima Loksa Phuk. Protohistoric period.

The rock art sites of Spiti (from lowermost to uppermost) are listed below.

#### Petroglyphs

Name of Site	Location
Sumdo ( <i>Sum mdo</i> ) 1	Cliffs immediately above the main road
Sumdo 2	Giant boulder above the river
Dzamathang ( <i>Rdza ma thang</i> )	Shelf above the Gya River
Shelatse ( <i>Shel la rtse</i> )	Old trail between Hurling and Sumdo
Hurling Pharke ( <i>Hur gling phar ke</i> )	Slopes west of the Karti Naullah
Gyurmo ( <i>Gyur mo</i> )	Inside the Karti Naullah above Hurling
Gyu West ( <i>Rgyu</i> )	Bench below main road west of Gyu confluence
Draknak ( <i>Brag nag</i> )	Slopes east of Hurling
Drakdo Kiri ( <i>Brag rdo ki ri</i> ; spelling?)	Benches east of Hurling

Gyari ( <i>Rgya ri</i> )	Sloping flat on east side of Sumra River
Sahal Thang ( <i>Sa skal thang</i> )	Benches on west side of Sumra River
Tibtra	Bench near flood damaged bridge east of Lari
Tsen Tsalep ( <i>Rtsan rtsa leb</i> ; spelling?)	Flats near Lari stud farm
Lari Tingjuk ( <i>La ri ting mjug</i> )	Flats east of Lari
Lari Tangmoche ( <i>La ri thang mo che</i> )	Fields and orchards around Lari
Jowa Desa ( <i>Jo ba sdad sa</i> )	Inside side valley at Lhari
Lari West	Benches west of Lari
Tabo ( <i>Ta po</i> )	Tabo and environs
Angla ( <i>Dbang la?</i> )	On slopes and ridge north of Tabo
Poh Thangka ( <i>Spo thang kha</i> )	Benches upstream of Poh
Gangchumik ( <i>Sgang chu mig</i> )	Slopes upstream of Poh on old trail to Dankhar
Jomo Phuk ( <i>Jo mo phug</i> )	Cliff and boulders near Jomo Phuk
Pheldar Thang ( <i>'Phel dar thang</i> )	Boulder shrine in eponymous flat
Dungma Drangsa ( <i>Mdung ma brang sa</i> )	A boulder at the foot of Kunzam La
Taktse ( <i>Stag rtse?</i> )	A boulder at the foot of Kunzam La.

### Pictographs

Name of Site	Location
Kubum ( <i>Sku bum</i> )	Old Tengyü monastery
Thonsadrak ( <i>Mthon sa brag</i> )	Across Spiti River from Rangrik
Nyima Loksa ( <i>Nyi ma log sa phug</i> )	Cave above Sumling
Simo Khadang ( <i>Srin mo kha gdang</i> )	Cave above Chichim

*The contents and frequencies of occurrence*

The rock art of Spiti boasts a wide spectrum of both figurative and non-figurative compositions, consisting of various zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, geometric and symbolic subjects. Animals make up around 70% of the approximately 6000 petroglyphs, anthropomorphs (figures in human form) constitute about 15% of the total, geometric forms 10%, and symbolic subjects and shrines 5%.

The most common animals depicted in the petroglyphs of Spiti are wild caprids, which constitute approximately 90% of zoomorphic subjects.



*Fig. 4 — Ibex, blue sheep and wild yak carvings, Draknak. Protohistoric period.*

The most prevalent caprid portrayed is the blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), followed by the ibex (*Capra sibirica*).<sup>6</sup> Blue sheep and ibex are found as part of hunting and non-hunting compositions.

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<sup>6</sup> The ibex is probably the most widespread animal species in the rock art of Eurasia. On ibex in the rock art of Ladakh, see Thsangspa 2014; Thsangspa n.d.; Bruneau 2010; Vernier 2007. For ibex rock art in Wakhan: Mock 2011. For ibex in Mongolia: Jacobson and Meacham 2009.



*Fig. 5 — Hunters on foot with bows and arrows attacking ibex, Draknak. Protohistoric period.*

The ratio of blue sheep to ibex in rock art appears to be more than two to one. In the rock art of Spiti, blue sheep are identified by shorter horns that curve in opposite directions on either side of the head while the horns of the ibex overarch the body of animals. There are however permutations in the style of horns creating a good deal of ambiguity in certain depictions of these two species of wild caprids. Still, today, the blue sheep is the most common wild ungulate in Spiti while the ibex is second, so their prevalence in the zoomorphic rock art of the region reflects current ecological conditions. The remaining 10% of zoomorphs in Spiti rock art in descending order of frequency are wild carnivores (tigers, snow leopards and wolves), equids (mostly horses), wild yak, deer, argali sheep and birds.



*Fig. 6 — Horned eagle, icon of Greater Western Tibetan culture, Sumdo 2. Iron Age.*

The standard anthropomorphic depiction in the rock art of Spiti of all periods consists of figures with long, straight, narrow bodies and thin legs and arms.



*Fig. 7 — Stick figures brandishing bows and other anthropomorphic and animal figures, Sahal Thang.*



*Fig. 8 — Dancing figures with Tibetan inscription of same timeframe, Tabo. Early Historic period.*

Many of these anthropomorphs are not much more than 'stick figures' and their heads are usually round. There are two basic types of emblematic figures, one with curved appendages and one with

angular appendages. Many anthropomorphs have arms extending downward.



*Fig. 9 — Ibex, Blue sheep and anthropomorphs in a non-hunting context, Gyurmo. Iron Age and Protohistoric period.*

This is in contrast to Upper Tibet and Ladakh where the majority of anthropomorphic figures have outstretched or uplifted arms.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Upper Tibet and Ladakh, martial contests and battle scenes in the rock art of Spiti are rare. Horse riders constitute another category, albeit a small one, of anthropomorphic rock art in Spiti.

In Upper Tibet and Ladakh the equestrian arts are much better represented. Spiti is a precipitous mountain region, with far fewer level areas than Ladakh or Upper Tibet. Furthermore, the hunting of blue sheep and ibex is usually carried out in rugged mountain terrain unsuitable for horses. These factors may help to account for the paucity of horse-rider rock art in the region.

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear why arm positions in Spiti contrast with those in Upper Tibet and Ladakh. As one possibility, it may be that early Spitian culture was more strongly oriented toward telluric phenomena and points of reference.



*Fig. 10 — Figure on horseback, Dzamathang. Protohistoric or Early Historic period.*

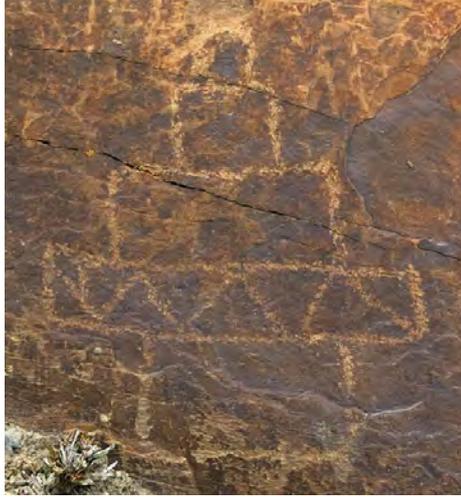
Large composite scenes are typical of Spitian rock art; they consist of many animals and anthropomorphs with each figure touching the other or nearly so.



*Fig. 11— A large mass of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, Sahal Thang. Protohistoric period.*

Lines and more complex geometric subjects are often interspersed among the figurative rock art. These types of complex scenes are full of activity and exuberance, a symphony of figures in movement. In Upper Tibet, however, large composite scenes are less common, and groups of interconnected subjects unusual.

Elementary tiered shrines and more complex *stūpas* comprise another major category of figurative rock carvings in Spiti.



*Fig. 12 — A rudimentary chorten or some other type of tiered shrine, Gyurmo. Early Historic period.*

These types of ceremonial structures have a strong resonance with those in Upper Tibet and Ladakh.<sup>8</sup>

Complex geometric subjects in Spiti are much more prevalent than in Upper Tibet or Ladakh.

Non-figurative subjects make up around 12% of the total rock art in Ladakh (Bruneau and Bellezza 2013: 31) and considerably less in Upper Tibet, and are largely comprised of simply designed compositions. In Spiti intricate rectilinear and curvilinear designs are quite common.

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<sup>8</sup> For a comparison of tiered shrines in the rock art of Spiti and Upper Tibet, see Bellezza In press; 2015a (August *Flight of the Khyung*, figs. 41–73).



*Fig. 13 — Simple geometric subjects consisting of a square partitioned into twelve sections and a sun with seven rays, Tabo. Protohistoric period.*



*Fig. 14 — A more complex geometric subject consisting of curvilinear and rectilinear motifs, Sahal Thang. Iron Age or Protohistoric period.*

The repertoire of symbolic representations includes: swastikas, sunbursts, crescent moons, trees, circles and dots (fig. 15). As in Upper Tibet and Ladakh, swastikas face in both directions in the rock art of the pre-10<sup>th</sup> century CE. Some rock art in this category may have had a dual function as actual facsimiles of the things shown as well as encapsulating mythological, ideological, mystical and other forms of abstract cultural information.



*Fig. 15 — Sun, swastika, cervid and other wild ungulates taken in direct sunshine, Drakdo Kiri. Protohistoric or Early Historic period*

Like Upper Tibet and Ladakh, there is no irrefutable evidence for the portrayal of domestic animals, pastoralism, encampments and houses, topographical features, or the sky and earth in the rock art of Spiti. We might assume that the rock surface itself was perceived of as simulating the physical environment and that figures created on these surfaces are an implicit acknowledgement of the surroundings.

Unlike the rock engravings, no hunting and almost no animals are represented in the assemblages of pictographs. Instead, anthropomorphs and symbolic compositions predominate. Human figures are shown in what appear to be provocative or highly demonstrative poses. Pictographs include symbols, mainly the swastika but also sun, crescent moon, circle and tree.

### *Chronology*

An absolute chronology of rock art in Spiti is not yet feasible due to well-known limitations in the scientific techniques used to directly date it.<sup>9</sup> We are therefore forced to rely on a relative chronology based on collateral forms of evidence. These include:

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<sup>9</sup> On dating rock art on the western portion of the Tibetan Plateau, see Bellezza 2008, pp. 162, 163; Bruneau and Bellezza 2013, pp. 6–9; Suolang Wangdui 1994, pp. 33, 34; Chayet 1994, pp. 55, 56.

cultural/historical analysis, stylistic and thematic categorization, associative archaeological data, gauging environmental changes, examination of techniques of production, placement of superimpositions, and assessment of erosion, re-patination of petroglyphs and browning and ablation of pictographs. As most of these types of evidence are not currently verifiable using scientific methods, the relative chronology I have devised for Spitian rock art is expressed in broad and somewhat fluid terms.

A provisional chronology for the rock art of Spiti is as follows:

#### I. Prehistoric epoch

- Late Bronze Age (circa 1500–800 BCE): Mascoids (anthropomorphic visages in emblematic form).
- Early Iron Age (circa 800–500 BCE): Anthropomorphs with angular appendages and prominent displays of male genitalia, with and without wild ungulates. Deeply carved and very heavily re-patinated petroglyphs restricted in style.
- Iron Age (circa 500–100 BCE): Tigers and horned eagles exhibiting Upper Tibetan and Ladakhi influences; anthropomorphs with angular and rounded appendages and male genitalia, with and without wild ungulates; spirals and other geometrics. Deeply carved and heavily or moderately re-patinated petroglyphs somewhat restricted in style.
- Protohistoric period (100 BCE to 650 CE): Archers on foot and horseback hunting wild ungulates; complex curvilinear and rectilinear designs; elementary tiered shrines. Mostly, less deeply carved and moderately re-patinated petroglyphs of diverse styles and techniques. Pictographs of analogous styles and themes.

#### II. Historic Epoch

- Early Historic period (650–1000 CE): Portraits of horse riders and standing anthropomorphs; complex tiered shrines (*stūpas*); conjoined sun and moon; geometrics based on earlier phases of rock art. Most carvings shallow; modeling of figures crude. Pictographs of analogous styles and themes. A degenerate era in the production of traditional rock art.
- Vestigial period (1000–1300 CE): Buddhist artistic influences and themes as well as art imitative of earlier phases. The terminal period in the production of traditional rock art.

- Later Historic period (post-1300 CE): Copycat art contrived in style and presentation.

*General cultural and historical observations*

Ethnographic research I have carried out in Upper Tibet indicates that hunting was not merely an economic activity, but one closely connected to religious beliefs concerning the pantheon of local spirits and the manner in which they are propitiated.<sup>10</sup> A sacred dimension is incorporated in the hunting traditions of many different peoples worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, hunting may have had mythic, ritual and ceremonial overtones for ancient Spitians. The high elevation parietal locations and contents of the pictographic sites indicates that they had cult functions. Stylistic and thematic parallels with rock art in Upper Tibet and Ladakh strongly suggest allied mytho-ritual functions.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for the rock art of Spiti utilitarian, social as well as religious functions are indicated.

Aside from their role in hunting, blue sheep and ibex have cultic, mythic, ritual and symbolic status in the Tibetan cultural world, as illustrated by archaeological, textual and ethnographic sources. In Spitian rock art blue sheep and ibex are often presented alone in portraits as well as in large composite scenes as companions of human figures. The diverse roles blue sheep and ibex play in the rock art of Spiti from the Iron Age until the Early Historic period are reflected in these various configurations. This ancient presence is still embodied in the sacred roles of blue sheep and ibex in contemporary Greater Western Tibet.

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<sup>10</sup> In traditional hunting rituals of propitiation carried out in the Changthang (Byang thang), the flesh of a large male blue sheep (in the venatic idiom: *rgya 'dan*) has good fortune-bestowing properties (Bellezza 2008: 462 [n. 345]). There is also a term for the hunting of deer and blue sheep in the Old Tibetan language (*sha dang rngas shor / shord / bshor*). For a review of historical, economic and technical aspects of hunting antelope in the Changthang, see Huber 2005. On the terminology of hunting in Old Tibetan documents and its historical and cross-cultural context, see Dotson 2013.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Jettmar (1988: 87) reports that among the Kalash of Chitral hunting ibex and markhor is considered a sacred activity. According to Olivieri (2011: 43 [n. 15]), in the rock art of Swat the ibex is an iconic figure, which may include the manifestation of a mountain deity, and its hunting was a ritualized activity. On sacred aspects of ibex hunting among the Dards of Ladakh, see Vohra 1989.

<sup>12</sup> On parallels in artistic and ideological aspects of culture in Upper Tibet and Spiti, see Bellezza 2015a (August *Flight of the Khyung*).

In Tibetan ritual literature, blue sheep and ibex and their body parts have a wide range of religious functions. The brief review that follows furnishes an incomplete but telling survey of these functions. One Yungdrung Bon ritual text of significant age describes the archetypal tools given to the great mountain god Nyenchen Thanglha (*Gnyan chen thang lha*) by his divine grandfather, which includes a bomb (*tso*) in the form of a blue sheep horn (Bellezza 2005: 179). In Yungdrung Bon ritual literature, the blue sheep horn (*rna ru*) is one of the weapons wielded by the chief god of Zhang Zhung, Gekhö (*Ge khod*), and the Zhang Zhung sage Tonggyung Thuchen (*Tong rgyung mthu chen*) is customarily depicted holding a blue sheep horn with an issuing flame. Yungdrung Bon texts describing the ritual constructs for Gekhö state that his body receptacle is a pair of golden horns of the blue sheep (Bellezza 2008: 256, 258, 322). In another ritual text for the god Gekhö, one of nine divine brothers, Thocho Yampa Thuwoche (*Tho yam pa mthu bo che*), rides on a crystal blue sheep (*ibid.*, 317, 318).

The Yungdrung Bon history of the oral transmission of an esoteric mind training tradition (*Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs*) records that the Zhang Zhung saint Nangzher Löpo (*Snang bzher lod po*) manifested on an island in Lake Darok Tsho (*Da rog mtsho*) from a blue sheep horn of white crystal (Bellezza 1999: 80). In the Old Tibetan ritual text *Rnel drñ 'dul ba'i thabs sogs*, a sacrificial blue sheep lamb (*rne'u*) assists the dead in reaching the celestial afterlife (Bellezza 2013: 158). In this same text, the skin of a blue sheep is used as an apotropaic instrument to free souls enthralled by infernal demons (*ibid.*, 152).

In the Old Tibetan funerary ritual document designated Pt 1134, an ibex named Lord Male Ibex Surmounting Horns (*Skyin po ru thog rje*) acts as an emissary to bring a sacred vulture needed to complete the funeral of a suicide victim (Bellezza 2008: 529; 2010: 41). In a rare illuminated manuscript, written circa the 11th century CE, ibexes aid the dead in reaching the ancestral paradise (Bellezza 2013: 49, 50). A comparable psychopomp function is ascribed to the ibex in the Old Tibetan text *Rnel drñ 'dul ba'i thabs sogs* (*ibid.*, 122).

According to Francke (1914: 105), the ibex was a symbol of fertility in pre-Buddhist Ladakh, occupying a role comparable to the ram in Lahul. In Spiti and other regions of Greater Western Tibet, ibex and blue sheep horns are customarily installed on shrines for local protective deities known as lhatho (*lha tho*) and lhatsuk (*lha gtsug*).



Fig. 16 — Modern shrine of the lhatho class belonging to the territorial god (*yul lha*), Drabla Shaktse (*Dgra bla shag rtse*), Hansa.

The horns function as offerings (*mchod 'bul*) to and receptacles (*rten*) for these territorial and ancestral spirits. To celebrate births in Ladakh, ibexes are fashioned from dough (*ibid.*). Similarly, Francke believed that ibex carvings in Ladakh represented thanksgiving offerings for the birth of children (*ibid.*). Pirie (2008: 178) describes a Ladakh ritual commemorating the dead held at the end of the lunar year, in which ibexes made of dough are offered on a rocky outcrop. The carving of ibexes on rocks continues to the present day for the Brokpa (*'Brog pa, sic. Minaro*) of lower Ladakh made in gratitude for a successful hunt and in exchange for the animal's life (Peissel 1984: 85–87). During fertility rites (*Gotsi*) and sowing rites (*Chogtsi khis*) in Lahul, images of ibex are sculpted from butter (Bellezza 1997: 70 [n. 28]). In the Changthang, woman's sashes are woven with blue sheep and other animals as apotropaic and good luck symbols (Bellezza 2001: 197).

Human figures that can be positively identified as female in the rock art of Spiti are rare. This seems to indicate that the creation of petroglyphs in the region was largely the domain of males. The same observation can be made for Upper Tibetan rock art: it mostly revolves around activities typically conducted by males (i.e., hunting, combat, ithyphallic displays, etc.). The standard anthropomorphs of Spiti, arms pointing towards the ground, may possibly allude to a chthonic component in the symbolic or ideological information intended to be conveyed by this rock art. In 2016, members of the Spiti Rock Art and Historical Society discovered three mascoids on a boulder near Hurling.<sup>13</sup>

Mascoids are representations of anthropomorphic faces found in the rock art of many areas of Inner Asia, including Ladakh and Upper Tibet. These symbolic or emblematic visages are commonly dated by rock art specialists to the Bronze Age, and the style, heavy wear and re-patination of the Spiti examples seems to support this chronological attribution.

The identification and significance of geometric rock art in Spiti is enigmatic. In the absence of strong cultural indications, the large variety of geometric subjects encourages an inclusive view of their possible functions as both ideograms and pictograms. The lexicon of geometric subjects potentially includes: magical diagrams; cosmographs; emblems or signatures of individuals, clans or bands; sacred mental and visionary processes; and perhaps even figurative functions such as the depiction of encampments, labyrinths, or pathways and trajectories in the natural world.

The nature of Spitian pictographs combined with their remote locations indicates that this rock art was produced within a cult setting. There is nothing patently economic about them. The *khyung* and another bird and anthropomorphs in close association with one another enhance the cultic dimension of the pictographs. The repertoire of symbols (swastika, sun, moon, tree, etc.) selected for the pictographic art of Spiti mirrors ritual and mythological constructs described in Yungdrung Bon religious literature. It also draws this pictographic art into close cultural and religious correspondence with the rock art of Upper Tibet and Ladakh.

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<sup>13</sup> See Bellezza 2016b; on mascoid rock art in Upper Tibet and Ladakh and its north Inner Asian affinities, see Bruneau and Bellezza 2013, pp. 40–44.

*Conservation issues*

Some years ago, Laxman Thakur (2008: 28) warned that boulders bearing rock art in Spiti were being blown up to construct new houses and walls and to clear ground for tree planting.



*Fig. 17 — A plain that had many rock art boulders recently cleared for development of orchards, Sumra.*



*Fig. 18 — A rock art boulder damaged by installation in the wall of an orchard, Tabo.*

Thirty years ago the primary cause of rock art loss in Spiti was government-sponsored road construction and the building of various types of facilities for education, administration and economic

development. Today the major cause of destruction is the expansion of apple orchards in Lower Spiti.

I estimate that about 50% of all rock art in Lower Spiti, possibly some 1500 boulders and 6000 individual petroglyphs, has been destroyed in recent years.



*Fig. 19 — A large area with rock art eliminated for development projects, Poh.*



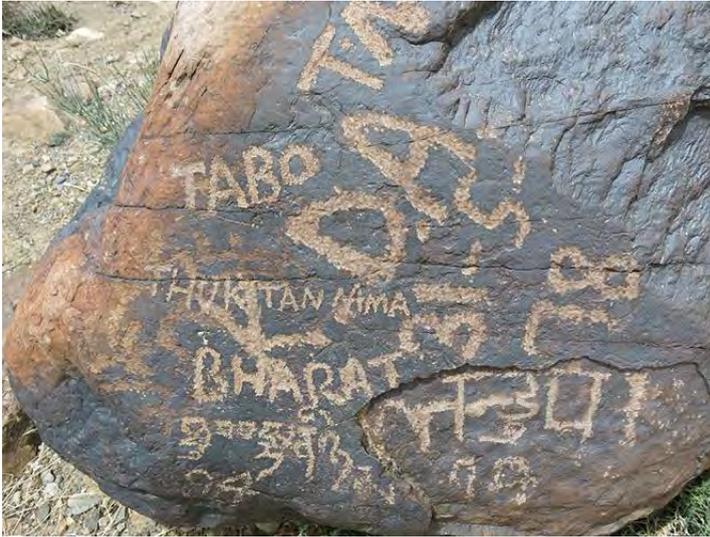
*Fig. 20 — Fields with much rock art destroyed to make way for an apple orchard, Tabo.*



*Fig. 21 — A broken boulder with ancient rock art, Poh.*



*Fig. 22 — Ancient rock art marked for destruction, Hurling.*



*Fig. 23 — Ancient rock art recently defaced by graffiti, Tabo.*

### *Conclusion*

The survey of the rock art of Spiti demonstrates that it is an extremely important resource for the study of the cultural history of the region. Rock art resonates with a host of mythological and ritual themes found in the Tibetan literary record. Tibetan texts containing archaic ritual and mythological materials often purport to be of prehistoric antiquity (pre-7th century CE) and in some instances rock art serves to verify the antiquity of these accounts. The rock art of Spiti is also crucial in placing local ethnographic phenomena in a deeper historical context by highlighting the pre-Buddhist (pre-10th CE) origins of certain customs and traditions.

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