

## REMARKS ON EARLY HISTORY OF LADAKH

### Rock carving and Tibetan Inscriptions of late first millennium and early centuries of the second millennium A.D.

Among the rock carving in Ladakh we come across as great variety of stupa drawings. These demonstrate the earliest traits in the development of Stupa art to those more sophisticated and artistically skilled later ones. These and the deep carvings of Chamba (Byams-pa) images have been dealt with elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. The three-point crown on the bas-relief from Kartse in the Suru valley (Snellgrove & Skorupski 1980: 10) and the one photographed by me below the Hambuting la in the old chiefdom of Sod, Purik (Photo 3, p. 134) are examples of early masterly works belonging to the late Gupta period. These belong to a group which includes the Maitreya at Maulbeck and the Maitreya at Naupur near Gilgit. These are close in the mastery of artistic skill and could have already begun to be carved about the 6th-7th century. Other such images carved on rock which are shallow carvings could also date from the 8th-10th century when the Tibetan empire extended up to Baltistan. These latter images are often accompanied by ancient Tibetan inscriptions. Some such examples are Maitreya at Satpura (near Skardu in Baltistan), the image of Manla (sMan-la) bet-

Photo II: Khalatse Balu-mkhar



Photos de l'auteur

ween Choklamsar and Shey, the five Buddhas carved on the rocky defile upon arrival at Shey as well as the carvings of stupas on the rocky defile upon arrival at Shey as well as the carvings of stupas on the rock wall of Balu Khar (Ba-lu mkhar) near Khalatse (or Khalsi Photo II).

A.H. Francke in the collection of Tibetan inscriptions from Ladakh remarked about them (*I. A.* April 1904: 95-96) and attempted to provide an approximate dating according to the various archaic characteristics they possessed.

Without going into the details of the orthography, which is beyond my competence, I would like to consider here the inscriptions which provide names of the last Darada rulers before a branch of the Tibetan dynasty, descended from Nimagon (Nyi-ma-mgon), extended its influence up to Khalatse (or Khalsi).

1. The inscription of “rGyal-po c'en Shirima” (Francke's transliteration)

This inscription is found on a boulder on the left bank of the Indus. Near this boulder is another inscription mentioning the

construction of a bridge. The name of the king is not legible but carries the title *rgyal-po chen-po* and mentions the *blon-po chen-po* Garka who made the bridge. Francke, on the basis of the mention in the Ladakhi Chronicles of the construction of a bridge by Lhachen Nag-lug at Khalatse, felt that the inscription belonged to this king. The name of the minister in the inscription is non-Tibetan and sounds Dardic. Francke also provided an accounts of the local traditions regarding the various bridge at Khalatse.<sup>2</sup>

2. In the neighbourhood of the preceding two boulders is found a third which is orthographically similar to the first.

It mentions “rGyal-po c'en-po rGya-shin- sk u-yzhon of Khala tse” (Francke's transliteration)

These record the last Dard rulers of Khalatse who had been partially tibetanised. The Tibetan influence in the area possibly began during the 8th century and though the Darads rulers continued to maintain their small chiefships they must have begun to adopt Tibetan cultural traits wherever they came in contact with them. The Tibetan expansion was aimed at the control of the “Four Garrisons” on the silk route.<sup>3</sup>



Photo IV: near Alchi mkhar-gog

The contact with the local Darada chiefs would have taken place where, geographically, the most conducive route into Baltistan offered itself.

There could have been armies stationed over a long period of time and perhaps in the inscriptions below we find their existence testified.

In this context the inscriptions close to the ancient fortification of Alchi (Al-chi mkhar-gog) can be mentioned. As regards the traditional lore about the construction of Alchi mkhar-gog it was during the rule of an ancient king Bandel (or king Bahand) probably of Dard origin (Francke Dec. 1906: 325).<sup>4</sup> Though according to Francke the dating of these inscriptions is post-first millennium A.D.<sup>5</sup> we can see in the stupa drawings the same style as the ones from Punyal near Gilgit drawn in Jettmar's work (1975: 279). Next to these are the carving of ancient stupas, possibly of *bön* origin, where there is the mention of the names of "army commanders" of various ranks who Tibetan army.

"Om, in the tiger-year by the 'brog-pa Bo-na Kharo-go".<sup>6</sup>

The Dards of Da (mDa') and Garkun are even today referred to as "*brog-pa*" and in the inscription we find the commander who was the leader of the *drokpa* (*'brog-pa*) Dard contingent. There are over 50 inscriptions many of which mention Tibetan commanders (Photos III & IV).

3. One can also mention the Buddhist ruler of the Satpur-Skardu area, "Lag-c'en Maha-bahu" whose name is mentioned in one of three inscriptions near the Satpur bas-reliefs (Francke: 1926). He possibly ruled prior to the 10th century.

According to the *Chronicles of Ladakh* the ruler Lha-chen Nag-lug built a palace at Wanle (Wam-la) in the Tiger Year and a palace at Khalatse (Francke: 1926). According to the chronology adopted by Petech we can date Nag-lug to the 12th century or a little before. His predecessor Lhachen Utpala has a Sanskrit name and

was most likely a Darads belonging to the Aryan-speaking clans (Petech 1977: 19; Pal: 1982). Here we must distinguish the portion of Ladakh under the newly established Ladakhi dynasty of Tibetan descent which had probably had considerable infusion of Aryan blood by this time. The rules in the regions west of Khalatse were still independent Dard chiefs who maintained control of their small principalities. Evidence of survival of some these chief ships until the 19th century is provided by Csoma de Cörös who mentions in the "*Geographical Notice of Tibet*" (1932: 125) among others the chief of the "Minaro" (i.e., the name of the ancestors of the Buddhist Dards of Da-Garkun area). Here can be mentioned the inscription of Khri-rgyal who was a petty chief of Kartse.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly we have the information about the rules of the kingdom of Sod who traced their genealogy from Gilgit (Francke 1921: 145-146).

The traditional folklore of the region gives ample evidence to conclude that the local chief of Sod, Chigtan Paskyum, Kartse, Wakha, Maulbeck, Dras, Shigar-Shingo, etc. trace their descent from Gilgit (Hashmatullah Khan 1939: 676-728) and maintained their independence at least until the 17th century. The massive fortification at Chigtan leaves no doubt that once the rulers were a power of considerable importance between the *gyapo* (*rgyal-po*) of Ladakh and the rulers of Skardu.

Photo III: near Alchi mkhar-gog



## NOTES

1 « Ethno-historicity of the Dards in Ladakh-Baltistan: Observation and Analysis ». Paper delivered at the IVth International Seminar on Tibetan Studies, Schloß Hohenkammer, München, July 1985. Here I have included only that data which was not presented in this paper delivered in 1985.

2 The first bridge was at Balu Khar (Bal-lu mkhar) to reach which merchants had to travel for four miles along the left bank of the Indus over very uneven ground. The king of khalatse (Khalsi) therefore built a second bridge below his castle to save the four miles of bad road. The king of Leh who made Khalatse into a Tibetan town built a third bridge on the present site and saved the trying journey on the left bank altogether. Though the Bal-lu mkhar bridge decayed the castle seems to have continued in use until the Balti invasion in 1600 (Francke Sept 1906: 238-239). In another place Francke is rightly of the opinion that at the place of the present bridge there was possibly from the earliest times an old settlement or a monastery as there are Kharosti and Brahmi inscriptions on both banks of the river. Later a Dogra fort was constructed at this place (Francke ZDMG 1907: 593,597-599 & 602)

3 The « Four Garrisons »: Kutcha, Kashghar, Khotan and Karashar (or Tokmak) (Chavannes 1903:150 footnote 4, 113 footnote 2). The geo-physical conditions in the area would have prohibited any kind of long lasting control. The inaccessible mountainous terrain would have been conclusive to fixeporous tendencies so that survival of acephalous « valley Republics » or self-sufficient petty chieftanships are a more feasible answer rather than direct administrative control over the region under consideration. Independent « Valley Republics » would have been particularly conclusive in the area where glaciating has left a wide valley floor and where at the lower end there is a narrow ravine like opening which would allow safe settlements from the defensive point of view. This sort of situation is not restricted to the Ladakh area and its extension into Baltistan and Gilgit is conceivable when one takes into consideration the little evidence available. The Tibetan intention was not total colonisation. They only garrisoned the main routes for their ultimate control of the nodal point along the trade routes of Central Asia, i. e., the « Four Garrisons ».

4 When the people of Maulbek speak of their past they divide it into three separate periods: 1) dog-dus (br-dus) of Dard times when the people used to be Dard; 2) *gyaldu* (*rgyal-dus*) the time of Tibetan Ladakhi kings; 3) *jambupedus* (*jam-bu-pa'i dus*), or the reign of the kings of Jammu (Francke March 1906:72).

5 Francke, I.A. Sept 1903: Plate VIII, No. 13; I.A. Dec 1906 Plate II and III

6 Francke, Dec 1906, No 16, P. 326 and 328; In another context I had noted the meaning of the word « *khrom* » in *drokskat* ('*brog-skad*) is « great » and « *go* » as leader or head (*mgo*). If this reading should be applied then the last letters would mean « Great leader ». Francke translated « *khrom-mgo* » as anger-head (Francke Dec 1906: 328 ).

7 Francke, March 1906: 77-78; ZDMG 1906: 599-600, mentions a local king'-od of Khalatse; also see *rgyal-khri* inscription from Saspol (Francke Dec 1906: 326 No 11 & 328).



Photo VI: near Khalatse bridge

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Photo V: near Khalatse bridge



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**RESUMÉ :** Les débuts de l’histoire du Ladakh ont toujours été plongés dans l’obscurité. Afin de jeter quelque lumière sur cette période, l’auteur s’est intéressé aux sculptures rupestres de cette première période, sculptures qu’il compare à celles, analogues, de Gilgit et du Baltistan. Il s’intéresse aussi aux traditions orales, aux inscriptions et à l’orthographe archaïque mentionnant les souverains antérieurs à l’établissement de la première dynastie ladakhi. Les pièces à conviction, présentées ici, devront être examinées par des historiens de l’art qui pourraient y apporter des éléments de chronologie en fonction du style et de l’iconographie. Les éléments épigraphiques et les sculptures rupestres devraient être systématiquement photographiées et analysées afin de pouvoir être datées.

**SUMMARY:** It has been difficult to scientifically reconstruct the early history of Ladakh. In order to make an attempt in this direction data on the rock carvings of the early period has been put forward and compared with similar sculptures from Gilgit and Baltistan. Oral traditions and inscriptions with archaic orthography mentioning rules, prior to the establishment of the first Ladakhi dynasty, have been dealt with. These pieces of evidence which are presented here need to be examined by art historians to provide a chronology on the basis of artistic skill and iconography. The epigraphic records and the rocks carvings need to be systematically photographed and scientifically analysed for them to provide chronological dates.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Es ist nicht einfach, die Geschichte der frühen Perioden Ladakhs wissenschaftlich zu rekonstruieren. Der vorliegende Versuch basiert auf der Präsentation von Felsreliefdarstellungen aus den frühesten Epochen dieser Region, die hier mit ähnlichen Felsskulpturen aus Baltistan und Gilgit verglichen werden. Behandelt werden orale Tradition und Inschriften mit frühzeitlicher Orthographie, in denen Fürsten erwähnt werden, die vor der Etablierung der ersten Dynastie Ladakhs herrschten. Die hier vorgelegten Beweisstücke müssten von Kunsthistorikern untersucht werden, um eine chronologische Darstellung bezüglich der Stile und der Ikonographie zu liefern. Die epigraphischen Elemente und die Felsskulpturen müssten systematisch fotografiert und wissenschaftlich analysiert werden, um datiert werden zu können.