Ancient Painted Pottery from Ladakh

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The study of pottery has long been recognised as an essential archaeological technique. Classifying pottery fragments and fixing them within their sequence of development often enables associated artifacts, buildings and whole sites to be dated where there is no other evidence of date. In Ladakh, however, systematic archaeology has hardly yet begun and no pottery sequence has yet been established.

The living Tibetan Buddhist culture of Ladakh and the comparative ease with which the ancient state could be visited have attracted historians, scholars of Buddhism and tourists alike since the middle of the last century. Inspired by the relative wealth of documentary sources for their enquiries, antiquarians had already established the outlines of the political and cultural history of Ladakh by the beginning of the present century and onto this foundation the Rev. Dr. A.H. Francke began to add, for the first time, archaeological data from both inhabited and abandoned sites, publishing his findings throughout the first decade and then summing up his life's work in the two volumes of his Antiquities of Indian Tibet in 1914 and 1926. His brief observations on ancient pottery in Ladakh are the only published notes on this subject before the present author's even briefer observations in the late 1980s.

Francke's pottery finds

Francke's first record of his finds of distinctive pottery was published in 1905 in Indian Antiquary. He states that on the ground around the fort rock of Balukhar he found fragments of large earthenware pots similar in shape (but not decoration) to those still in use in Ladakh in his time. He describes the Balukhar fragments as being from hand-made pots, having blood red designs (in one case apparently representing reeds), and shows a selection of fragments in his plate IV. He adds that these designs were similar to those on some pots he unearthed in what he called Dard graves near Leh in 1904. (In later publications he gives that date as 1903, presumably an error of memory since Jane Duncan confirms the date as January 1904, see below.) On the basis of his mistranslation of the long inscription on the fort rock of Balukhar he had already concluded that the fort belonged to Lamayuru, before the kings of Ladakh captured the Balukhar-Khalatse district; on orthographical grounds he gave the inscription a date in the late first millennium AD. Taking all this evidence together he concluded that the painted pottery was used by the pre-Tibetan Dard inhabitants of Ladakh. A recent paper has demonstrated that Francke seriously misunderstood the substance of the Balukhar inscription but his dating of it was accurate enough.

In the following year Francke reported finding two shards of similar pottery at the ruined fort by the bridge from Saspola to Alchi. In his report to The Archaeological Survey of India on his research journey in 1909, Francke described reinvestigating the 'Dard' graves, two miles above the Commissioner's Compound (Karzu) outside Leh, near the Tiseru stupa, the graves he had first entered in 1903 (sic) with his colleague, Dr. Shawe. He found pots (and fragments of pots) ranging in height from 10 cms to 90 cms, many containing human bone, the product of some no-longer current funeral ceremony. In 1909 he did not find painted pots, but he describes two which he did find on the earlier occasion as being 'elegant, medium-sized


knows Ladakh intimately, and in the interim to suggest that some useful tentative deductions can be made from even the little information which we possess at present.
vessels ornamented with designs in dark red colour' and adds that the
designs consisted of 'spirals, ladders and zig-zag bands; and occasionally
there were bundles of lines which may represent grass or reeds' (p. 105). We
can accept that he was describing decoration which was, in some cases at
least, similar to that on the fragments he (and later I) found at Balukhar.

He identified the pots containing bones as relics of the burial customs of
The Empire of the Eastern Women as described in the Chinese sources; but
because the accompanying skulls were of a dolichocephalic (long headed)
type he concluded that they were the skulls of Dardic, not Tibetan, inha-
bitants of Ladakh. On both counts he tentatively assigned a date of 0 to 500
AD for the graves and so also for the painted pottery.

In Volume I of his Antiquities of Indian Tibet, he gave a fuller account of the
opening and searching of these graves in 1909 and of the variety of artifacts
he extracted. In the same volume he reported hearsay evidence of graves
containing similar pots and skulls in the Gya valley in southeastern Ladakh,
which he was unable to open for himself (pages 64-65).

Discussion of Francke's pottery finds

Francke's findings are difficult to re-evaluate because his methods were quite
unscientific and his finds are not, apparently, available for re-examination
today. His photographs of pots from the grave investigated in 1909 near
Tiseru are not of the painted type, since none were found in that year.8 Jane
Duncan's photograph of pots found in 1904,9 confirmed as such by Francke,10
do not show designs like those which he illustrated from Balukhar. Interest-
ingly, what she says is that 'jars were found with the same colouring [not
pattern] as on those [Balukhar] fragments'; and the examples she illustrates
from one of Dr. Shawe's photographs show a clear volute motif, quite unlike
anything Francke published, or I have found. (One suspects that beneath the
genteel, period chatter of her memoirs, Miss Duncan hid a strong, sceptical
mind and was not entirely convinced by Francke's enthusiastic deductions:
in describing the pottery discoveries she twice used the word 'presumably'
and also says the investigations at Balukhar were 'hasty and superficial').

In both 1914 publications Francke states that various of his finds of pottery
and other artifacts were taken to the Pratap Singh Museum, Srinagar,11 But
elsewhere he lists items he presented to the Indian Museum, Calcutta12 and
also states that pottery finds of 1909 from Alchi bridge fort were 'brought to
Simla'.13 It does not appear that they have received further study in any of
these places. I have not visited the Srinagar museum recently; but in 1987 I
inquired at the Simla museum and was told categorically that they had none
of Francke's materials. Until his pottery finds are located, their significance
cannot be considered further.

Francke's belief that the graves and their pots were the work of Dards is
difficult to maintain today. Whether or not Dards (however defined) inha-
bited and ruled all of the historical territory of Ladakh, as Francke believed,
before the formation of the Ladakhi kingdom in the 10th century by descend-
ants of the imperial kings of Tibet, is still an open question; and there is no
firm evidence that they did.

Even if they did, it does not necessarily follow that Tibetan racial stock
then replaced 'Aryan' Dard stock in the wake of this conquest, as he also
believed. He ignored the quite credible possibility that racially and culturally
differing people lived side by side in Ladakh in the past as they do today.
Indeed, in Francke's time there lived in Leh Tibetans (Buddhist), Ladakhis
(Buddhist, Moslem and Christian), Turks from Central Asia (Moslem), Baltis
(Moslem), Kashmiris (Moslem and Hindu), Dogras from Jummu (Hindu),
Sikhs from the Panjab, and Europeans (Christian); eight cultures, six reli-
gions, at least four different funeral customs and several shapes of skull.
Anthropometric measurements made since Francke's time support this view,
that the racial stock (as some call it) of Ladakh has been mixed for a long
time;14 and the variety of scripts and languages found in the famous inscrip-
tions at Tangtse demonstrate that many different sorts of people were
passing through Ladakh one thousand and more years ago.

If one wishes to guess why human bones were buried in pots at Tiseru,
one might guess that the pots were simple ossuaries (astodana) of the Zoro-
astrians. The deceased may have been Zoroastrian merchants from Central
Asia: some Sogdian personal names found in inscriptions within the Him-
alaya are Zoroastrian. Or one might note the excavations in Swat which have
revealed proto-historic burials of partially cremated human bones in pots

8. Ibid. 1914b: plate XXVIIIa.
11. Ibid. 1914a: 112; 1914b: 117.
13. Ibid.: 72.
within an unrecognisable cult context; but the differences between Swat and Tiseru are as great as the apparent similarities. The fact is that we have so little information on the Tiseru graves, and no others elsewhere in Ladakh have been systematically excavated, that it is impossible at present to conclude anything certain at all.

Francke's belief in the ubiquitous survivals of Dard creativity from ancient times can also be challenged in individual cases. The 'Dard' fort of Balukhar has already been mentioned and the paper by Denwood and Howard demonstrated that the fort to which the inscription refers was probably built by Tibetans from Khotan at the time when Ladakh was part of the Tibetan empire, before its collapse after the assassination of Langdarma in 842 AD. The round brick tower which Francke calls a Dard Castle on the west ridge of Leh Tsemo (peak) probably dates from sometime before the 15th century AD, i.e., from the period of the first ruling dynasty of Ladakh. His 'Mon' castles of Zanskar appear more likely to have been built in the 15th and the immediately preceding centuries.

On more general grounds, he is inconsistent and illogical in his names of the makers of the ancient graves. We find him calling the graves at Leh 'Dard' but those in the Gya valley, which he says were similar, he calls 'Mon'. It seems probable that local informants were using the terms 'Brog pai, of the Dards, and Mon gyi, of the Mons, to mean anything so old that they had forgotten who built it, and, like certain 'Mon' stupas of Rumtse, near Gya, of an obsolete design which no longer had any ritual or social use. Tucci made this observation as long ago as 1935 and Dainelli before him. In colloquial speech 'Brog pa is the name Ladakhis give to the Dards of the lower Indus, towards Baltistan; really, it means dwellers in the grazing grounds, i.e. far beyond the edge of village cultivation. Francke's informants may not have meant him to understand anything very specific: merely that the graves were made by people who were Not Like Us, nor like any historical people whom they recognised. From Francke's photographs the 'Mon'

stupas at Rumtse and Gya appear to be typical western Tibetan designs of the period of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism.

Francke's ethnological researches did give him a reasonable basis on which to build his hypothesis that the Dards of Gilgit were spread more widely up the Indus in ancient times than in recent periods; but he over-interpreted his evidence to create a theory of successive racial and cultural invasions which his evidence does not justify. It is therefore unsafe to adopt the designation 'Dard' to classify painted pottery of the type which Francke found at Balukhar and the Alchi-Saspola bridge. It will henceforth be referred to simply as Painted Pottery. And it will be shown that Francke's suggested dating of this pottery also needs revision.

Recent finds in Lower Ladakh

In 1985, while investigating the fortified places of Ladakh, I found examples of Painted Pottery at four locations in lower Ladakh; a selection is reproduced in Fig. 1. At Balukhar I found many pieces: the pots were hand-made and the shards gently curved, as from large vessels used for holding liquid (but no pieces had handles or the remains of handles); their ground colour varied from biscuit to dull orange and their patterns, in dark red, appeared to be brush painted (the ends of lines were distinguished by thickened lobes) and fired in. The fragments were of the same type as described and pictured by Francke in 1905. One piece of Painted Pottery was found embedded in the shuttered mud of the fort on top of the rock and must, therefore, be older than the fort. Shuttered mud construction (i.e., mud moulded between forming boards, in situ) appears to have been used in Ladakh only in the second half of the 16th century. The inscription on Balukhar rock which commemorates the building of an earlier fort (not necessarily the first) has been dated by Denwood to the period of the Tibetan imperial occupation of Ladakh: approximately late 8th to early 9th centuries. Tentatively, therefore, we may suggest that the Painted Pottery at Balukhar comes from the period between the 8th and the 16th centuries.

At Wanla, in the ruins of the old settlement on the temple hill, I found two pieces of Painted Pottery. The architectural evidence of the temple and the ruined balcony, and the information in the Chronicle (La duags rgyal rabs) that

22. Ibid. 1907: 12-50.
King Nag lug of Ladakh built a fort or palace here, agree in suggesting that Wanla was founded in (approximately) the late 11th century; the architectural evidence alone suggests that Wanla ceased to be of national significance after the end of the 16th century.  

At Brag nag fort above Khalatse village I found one piece of Painted Pottery. This fort may be the one built here by the same King Nag lug, as the Chronicle also tells us; it is not known for how long it remained in use.

Finally, at Saspola fort I found one piece of this Painted Pottery. There is no evidence for the chronology of this fort other than the architectural, which gives a terminal date at the end of 16th century; but its foundation appears to have been long before that.

27. Ibid. 1989: 287.
Unlike Francke, I did not find any Painted Pottery at the ruined fort by the Alchi-Saspola bridge; but that fort, now destroyed, may have been built in the 11th century.²⁸

Recent finds in Upper Ladakh

On a subsequent visit to Ladakh, I found examples of Painted Pottery in Upper Ladakh which were broadly similar to those found in Lower Ladakh (Fig. 2) but some perhaps exhibiting a variation on the Lower Ladakh tradition. I also found what may be another type: a smeary red painted pottery (Fig. 3).

On Leh Tsemo, on the south facing slope immediately below the ruined building made of shuttered mud on the summit, I found one piece of pottery which seems to be similar to the Painted Pottery of Lower Ladakh. The texture of the clay of this piece was, however, much coarser and the surface both rough and faded. The pattern is bold, even crude, compared with the patterns of Lower Ladakh. The mud building is traditionally believed to be the remaining part of a palace or fortification built by King Tashi Namgyal (c.1555 to c.1575 AD).²⁹ One of the two temples immediately below the mud building is the mGon khang, also built by him; the other temple is more difficult to date since it has been completely refurbished. The first fortifications on the summit may have been built earlier, in the 15th century;³⁰ but the evidence of the rounded brick tower on the west ridge³¹ and the presence of much older stone carvings in the neighbourhood, such as those at Chanspa,³² indicate that settlement in and around Leh began long before the 15th and 16th centuries.

In the rubble of a ruined settlement on a spur of the hills forming the western side of the Sabu valley, I found one piece of Painted Pottery as coarse as that found on Leh Tsemo. Like the latter, the flowing lines of the painting suggest that it was done with a brush; and like the latter the piece is too small to give any idea of the rest of the pattern. According to local informants the ruined settlement was the village of Sengegang on Lang Tsemo (Glang rtse mo) which, the Chronicle tells us, was built during the time

Shangkhar (Spyan mdkar: perhaps Sabu Castle) was in use, and may date, therefore, from the 14th century, although some doubt remains about these identifications.³³

In the ruins of Rinchen Zangpo’s monastery at Nyarma I found one piece of Painted Pottery which seems to belong to this general type although the ground colour was a medium brown and the pattern almost black, possibly the result of discoloration in use or as a result of some weathering process. The pattern was on the convex outer surface of the pot but it appeared possible that there were also faint traces of further painted decoration on the concave inner surface. Rinchen Zangpo, the great missionary of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, lived from 958 to 1055 AD. The date of the destruction of the monastery is not known but it may have taken place during the 15th century.³⁴

Below the ruins of the north side of Suramati’s Castle, on the north bank of the Indus directly opposite Stakna Monastery and only a couple of kilometers from Nyarma, I found one piece of pale orange pottery with a small area of solid red paint which was part of a larger area but broken so that the nature of the design could not be recognised. It was similar to some of the smeary red fragments found at Igu and Chimre Gonkhar (see below). This settlement cannot be dated at present but appears to be several centuries old.³⁵

At Igu, by the lowest fortification ruins at the foot of the cliff (and possibly at the source of its inhabitants’ water supply), above which stand the ruins of the ancient fortress, I found one piece of Painted Pottery exactly like those from Balukhar: the ground colour a greyish biscuit colour and the pattern a faded dark red. The pattern was on the convex side of the fragment but the other was painted with a complete coat of smeary red. Nearby were three other fragments decorated with smeary red paint only, one of them painted on both sides.

This fortress is bByi gu Khri khang. It was the seat of the Bankapa’s family who first came to prominence in the 17th century³⁶ and held high office thereafter down to the Dogra conquest of Ladakh in the 19th century. The structure of the principal buildings contains the typical banded texture masonry of the 17th century (like Leh Palace). However such a fertile oasis,
below a pass leading to Nubra, suggests that it must have been settled and important long before that.

Finally, in the Chimre valley, at two sites, I found fragments of pottery with the smerey red decoration only. At Sakti Castle several fragments were covered all over with smeared red and dark red colour. In the ruins of a settlement next to Chimre Monastery, known locally as Chimre Gonkar (or Gompakhar), fragments of pottery were found which had been decorated with a red colour smeared over a light orange ground to produce an amorphous decoration (Fig. 3).

Chimre Monastery was built in the 17th century; and the banded texture masonry of Sakti Castle indicates a similar date there, but there is older masonry incorporated into the 17th century defences. Gomkar is said locally to be older than the monastery. This valley was also part of the territory of the Bankapa's family; but it was clearly settled long before they rose to prominence as is evidenced by the cave temple of Trak thak further up the valley and a ruined stupa of the Lotsava type near to it. This valley must always have been strategically important since one of the main passes to Nubra, the Chang La (Byang la), lies at its head.

Conclusion

Conclusions must at present be tentative. All the fragments are too small to permit us to recognise the type of vessel they come from. Often it is even difficult to decide whether the pattern is on the outside or the inside (a wide flaring neck or a bowl may be decorated inside). And their chronological provenance cannot be certain since they are all, with one exception at Balukhar, unstratified surface finds.

However, we may state the following. The technique of painting a design onto a pot before firing is not recognised today, as Francke himself reported and as my informants confirmed. The same is true of the smeared colour (N.B. it is not clear from these small fragments how this smeared effect was obtained). Taking all the painted fragments into consideration there appear at present to be two styles of Painted Pottery: the more delicate Lower Ladakh style shown in Fig. 1 and also found with certainty at Igu in Upper Ladakh; and the coarser style of Upper Ladakh shown in the other three examples in Fig. 2: from Nyarma, Sabu and Leh. In addition, in Upper Ladakh we have the smeared colour pottery (Fig. 3) which has so far been found only in the neighbouring valleys of Chimre and Igu and at Suratami's Castle approximately 12 kilometers away.

The evidence now available throws grave doubt on Francke's very early dating of his finds of Painted Pottery and the Dard cultural context in which he set them. There is no surviving evidence to connect Painted Pottery as described here with pots containing bones. There is no evidence — only Francke's guess — to connect the pots containing bones, and the graves they were in, with the historical Dards. And there are many outstanding questions to be answered about who the Dards were, whether they ever formed a majority of the population of Ladakh and whether they ruled there.37

In this context it is relevant to recall Philip Denwood's paper on the language of Ladakh, given to the 5th Colloquium of IALS in London, in which he concluded that the close similarities between the Tibetan-language dialects of Ladakh, Purig and Baltistan, taken together with other evidence, might well indicate that the introduction of the Tibetan language through these districts began before the 7th century AD,38 which is before the earliest

archaeological date yet indicated for any Painted Pottery. My preference is that, rather than pursuing an elusive Dard prehistory of Ladakh, it may be more productive for us to seek a peripherally Tibetan prehistory; and to assume that the population of Ladakh was always mixed because it was a meeting place for peoples migrating both up and down the Indus, and a place through which foreign traders, diplomats and others have passed for at least two thousand years.

It is now possible to suggest an alternative historical context for the Painted Pottery. The evidence from the fortifications of Lower Ladakh shows that the Painted Pottery has in every case been found in association with buildings and sites which are older than the 17th century; and that their buildings may have been begun, in four out of five instances, in the 11th century, and in the fifth in the 8th century. In all cases the possibility must not be ignored that earlier fortifications than those known today may have existed on these sites but there is no evidence yet discovered in any of them to suggest occupation in Francke’s proposed period of 0 to 500 AD. The much vaguer evidence from Upper Ladakh does not, at least, contradict this conclusion.

We may tentatively propose, therefore, that in Painted Pottery — particularly of the more delicate Lower Ladakh type — we have a cultural and chronological indicator of habitation during the early centuries of the kingdom of Ladakh (and at Balukhar perhaps during the period of the Tibetan Empire). This evidence should be added to the previously established testimony of stupa forms, carved woodworking and, perhaps, mud brick size, where more direct witness, such as documentary reference or wall painting, is not available. Where these archaeological relics of Ladakh’s history are to be found, more evidence might yet be discovered — and, if we are lucky, local oral traditions and neglected documents which will lead us back through time with surer steps.

Bibliography


The Scope of Tourism in Kargil District

Mohammed Jaffar Akhoon

Kargil, the western part of Ladakh, is believed to have been the first region to be inhabited by the early colonisers of Ladakh, the Indo-Aryan Mons from across the Himalayan range, Dards from the extreme western Himalayas, and the itinerant nomads from the Tibetan highlands. The region, by virtue of its contiguity with Kashmir, Kishtwar, and Kulu, served as the initial receptacle of successive ethnic and cultural waves emanating from across the great Himalayan range. It is believed that Mons carried north Indian Buddhism to this highland valley, the Dards and Baltis of the lower Indus valley are credited with the introduction of farming, and the Tibetans with the tradition of herding.

As a result of the mixing of these ethnic, occupational, and cultural elements, Kargil, once an important transit centre on the Pan-Asian trade network, is home to a society that is unique in J&K State. Due to heavy snowfalls in winter, vegetation in the District is more luxuriant than in eastern Ladakh. The majority of the population of approximately ninety-nine thousand are followers of Islam, with Buddhists constituting the second largest segment.

Compared with Leh, Kargil is much less developed in many respects, including the tourism sector. Initially, after the region was first opened up to tourism in 1974, many tourists would limit their visit to Leh only. However, during the last decade a gradual change in perception among the tourists appears to have come about, resulting in a steady increase in the number of visitors to western Ladakh. The area comprises valleys such as Suru, Drass, Zanskar, Chigtan and Batalik, the latter two continue to be off-limits to tourists. The district has great potential for different forms of adventure tourism, such as mountaineering, trekking, rafting, skiing, and hang gliding.