


The Swastika, Stepped Shrine, Priest, Horned Eagle, and Wild Yak Rider — Prominent antecedents of Yungdrung Bon figurative and symbolic traditions in the rock art of Upper Tibet¹

John Vincent Bellezza
(Tibet Center, University of Virginia)

Introduction

ungdrung (G.yung drung) Bon figurative and symbolic traditions were centuries in the making, as expressed through sculpture, repoussé metalwork, thangka painting, wood carving, ritual constructions, and manuscript illuminations, etc. Articulated through these media, the esthetic and intellectual vocabulary of Yungdrung Bon evolved over a thousand years, assuming iconographical traits that distinguish it from Tibetan Buddhist art. Modes of depiction and the techniques of production evolved over the centuries, reflecting transformations in taste, outlook and circumstances. Although the material and pictorial qualities of depiction have changed, semantic carryover has been pronounced, the product of a more or less integral Yungdrung Bon religious system.

The legacy of conception and design in Yungdrung Bon extends beyond the bounds of the extant religion to encompass earlier elements of figuration and symbolism. The oldest antecedents are seen in the rock art of Upper Tibet (Byang thang and Stod), the expansive highlands north and west of Central Tibet. This rock art is characterized by a wide array of prototypes of what would become prime Yungdrung Bon portrayals. This article focuses on five categories of these rock carvings and paintings, precursors to Yungdrung Bon subjects and emblems. The five categories include the swastika (*g.yung drung*),

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stepped shrine (*gsas mkhar* and *mchod rten*), priest/adept (*gshen* and *bon*), horned eagle (*khyung*), and animal mount (*chibs ra*). This work examines the pictorial qualities of these genres of rock art and explores how they may have contributed to Yungdrung Bon artistic and intellectual traditions at the dawn of the second millennium CE.

To minimize ambiguity surrounding the application of the term “Bon”, a note on its historical significance is in order.² In its current configuration, the Yungdrung Bon religion can be traced back to the late 10th and 11th centuries CE, when it began to assume still prevailing decorative, doctrinal and institutional characteristics. Yungdrung Bon, a lamaist religion, arose from the dynamics of post-Imperial-period (ca. 850–1000 CE) exchanges between Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. Although not well understood, these exchanges appear to have been characterized by both syncretic and conflictive processes involving political, economic and sectarian forces. Formative encounters between Buddhism and pre-existing cult traditions were initiated during the Imperial period (ca. 650–850 CE), a crucial time in the development of Tibetan religions.³ Archaeological and textual records indicate that prehistoric religious customs and beliefs in Tibet were indigenous in character but also subject to Eurasian influences.⁴ In traditional Tibetan parlance, all three pre-11th century CE phases of non-Buddhist religion (post-Imperial, Imperial and prehistoric) are known as *bon*, a generic ascription. In conformance with popular usage, the term *bon* qualified chronologically will be used in this study to designate the archaic religious scene in Tibet.

The Swastika

The counterclockwise swastika (*g.yung drung*) is the quintessential symbol of Yungdrung Bon, as well as an epithet for the religion itself. Numerous adherents, deities, sites, and temples are called swastika in Yungdrung Bon. The swastika is also a referent for many of its doctrines. For instance, religious heroes are called the ‘impeccable beings of the swastika’ (*g.yung drung sems dpa'*), the enlightened form is referred to as *g.yung drung sku*, and the path to liberation is the *g.yung*

² For an inclusive definition of *bon* / Bon, see Bellezza 2015a. For more in-depth discussions on the historical significance of this term, see Bellezza forthcoming; Kværne 2000; Stein 1972, pp. 229–247; Karmay 1998, pp. 157–168.

³ These religious encounters are described in the Yungdrung Bon historical text *Legs mdzod bshad*; see Karmay 1972.

⁴ For an interdisciplinary approach (ethnographic, textual and archaeological perspectives) to archaic religion in Tibet, see Bellezza 2008. Also, see Chayet 1994; Bellezza 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Haarh 1969; Tucci 1980; 1973; 1950; Stein 1972.

drung grub lam. The Yungdrung Bon expression for enduring good health and longevity is 'swastika of life' (*tshe yi g.yung drung*). The swastika is of course also a key symbol in Buddhism (oriented clockwise) and Tibetan folk religion (oriented in both directions).

Rock art swastikas in Upper Tibet face in both directions and range in execution from crudely scrawled to adeptly drawn. Relying on inductive means of chronological analysis, it appears that early examples date to the Late Bronze Age (1000–700 BCE) and Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE), and continued to be made in the Protohistoric period (ca. 100 BCE to 650 CE), Early Historic period (ca. 650–1000 CE) and Vestigial period (ca. 1000–1300 CE).⁵ Thus, painted and carved swastikas span a wide spectrum of time, ranging from the initial stages of Tibetan civilization to the time of the empire and finally to the termination of the great rock art tradition in Tibet in the early centuries of the second millennium CE.

I have documented close to 300 swastikas in Upper Tibetan rock art (petroglyphs and pictographs), making it the most common sign or symbol (an abstraction encapsulating philosophical, ritualistic mythic, or mystical forms of understanding). These swastikas carved and painted on stone surfaces come in diverse styles (bold, wispy, silhouetted, outlined, etc.) and sizes (5 cm to 70 cm in height), and occur in isolation, in conjunction with other symbols, and as part of scenes featuring ritual monuments, animals and anthropomorphs (figures in human form). Swastikas in the rock art of Upper Tibet, depending on the pictorial context, appear to have had diverse functions comprised of cosmological, fertility, apotropaic, benedictory, doctrinal, and sectarian elements.

⁵ Due to a lack of archaeological indicators, no attempt has been made to differentiate the Late Bronze Age from the Early Iron Age. I have devised a relative chronology for Upper Tibetan rock art based on various strands of evidence, including cultural and historical analysis, stylistic and thematic categorization, general site characteristics, associative archaeological data, gauging environmental changes in subject matter, examination of techniques of production, placement of superimpositions, and assessment of erosion and re-patination of petroglyphs and browning and ablation of pictographs. Dates determined using this inductive approach are provisional and unverifiable, but must suffice until more objective means of chronological analysis become scientifically feasible. On dating Upper Tibetan rock art, see Bellezza 2008, pp. 162, 163; Bruneau and Bellezza 2013, pp. 6–9; Suolang Wangdui 1994, pp. 33, 34; Chayet 1994, pp. 55, 56.



Fig. 1. A counterclockwise swastika flanked by the sun and moon, situated inside a small cave at Lce do, Gnam mtsho (Celestial Lake; Dpal mgon County/Gnam ru). This composition can be assigned to the Iron Age.

I have documented six examples of the sun-moon-swastika triad in rock art sites across the breadth of Upper Tibet.⁶ By virtue of the sun and moon appearing with the swastika, it too appears to have a celestial identity. In four examples, the sun and crescent moon flank a counterclockwise swastika, as if the latter figure was of central importance. This arrangement seems to suggest that the swastika was envisaged as the nexus or fountainhead of the universe or of primary traditions (e.g., lineal, cultic, mythical), with the sun and moon as subsidiary symbols of signification. In this rock art, the swastika assumes a cosmogonic or proliferative dimension.

The swastika as a generative symbol is well attested in the Tibetan folk tradition, implying the operation of long-term cultural and historical processes when seen through the prism of ancient rock art. Moreover, some functions of the swastika in Yungdrung Bon may be derived from prehistoric rock art in Upper Tibet. While direct historical

⁶ For other examples of the sun-moon-swastika composition in Upper Tibet, see Bellezza 2016a; Bruneau and Bellezza 2013, p. 112 (fig. II.10); Bellezza 2001, p. 358 (fig. 10.78); 2008, p. 165 (fig. 278), p. 166 (fig. 282), p. 175 (fig. 310).

links between Yungdrung Bon and pictographs and petroglyphs cannot be postulated with assurance, the seminal role of the swastika in prehistory is likely to have informed later religious discourse, as ancient traditions were adjusted or transformed to meet the needs of Tibetans in the historic era.



Fig. 2. A sun, moon and swastika carving on a boulder in Spiti, a lower elevation region of the Tibetan Plateau situated immediately west of Upper Tibet. Iron Age or Protohistoric period. The three figures appear to constitute an integral composition, as they were produced using the same carving technique and exhibit similar wear characteristics. The lighter hue of the sun can be attributed to the stripping away of the patina once covering the boulder due to localized geochemical processes.

The sun-moon-swastika triad comprises a well-established esthetic and semiotic device on the western third of the Tibetan Plateau. The joining of the swastika to the sun and crescent moon extended beyond Upper Tibet to include the western fringe of the Plateau. As with other

cognate genres of rock art (eg., animal style carnivores, wild yak hunting, horned eagles, stepped shrines, etc.), this signals that Spiti enjoyed close and sustained cultural ties with its much larger eastern neighbor.⁷



Fig. 3. The swastika joined to a crescent carved on a vertical rock face, Bshag bsangs (Nyi ma County/Nag tshang). Iron Age or Protohistoric period.

The pairing of a swastika with a crescent moon strongly suggests that the former is a solar symbol. The swastika as betokening the sun is well known in numerous cultures of ancient Eurasia, and the same holds true of ancient Tibet. This is chronicled in the text *Klu 'bum khra bo* (probably first compiled in the 10th century CE), in a creation myth centered around a goddess named Queen of the Water Spirits (*Klu'i rgyal mo*).⁸ This pantheistic goddess fashioned the universe out of her body parts, and from the light rays of her left eye appeared the sun, called the 'unsurpassable swastika' (*g.yung drung gyi bla na med pa*). Although the rock art composition and above textual reference are disparate sources from different periods, they mutually reinforce the theme of a solar swastika in Tibet. It can be put forward that the life-

⁷ On the cultural interrelationship between Spiti and Upper Tibet, as assessed through the rock art records, see Bellezza 2015b.

⁸ For a translation and discussion of the entire myth, see Bellezza 2008, pp. 343–349.

engendering qualities of the swastika in Yungdrung Bon may have been inspired by its earlier solar connotations.



Fig. 4. The swastika and crescent moon painted in red ochre among many other pictographs in the high elevation cave sanctuary known as Srin mo kha gdang (Gaping Mouth of the Ogress), Spiti. Protohistoric period.

This rock art is another example of a formative theme spilling over from Upper Tibet to the western edge of the Plateau. As in fig. 3, it appears that the moon is being paired with the sun in the guise of a swastika. In prehistoric rock art, swastikas were oriented indiscriminately in both directions and often with arms out of sync.

Cosmological and/or cosmogonic significance can probably be assigned to this rock art. In Tibet the sun and moon are considered to be the cardinal members of a group consisting of seven or eight heavenly bodies. The pairing of the sun and moon in Yungdrung Bon has acquired many different meanings. Conjoined, they famously symbolize the male and female hypostases of enlightenment in tantra. The sun and moon in Yungdrung Bon are also designates of religious lineages and practices, didactic symbols, ornaments of deities, and even the playthings of saints. As appealing as these Yungdrung Bon conceptions of the sun and moon are, it is uncertain that any of them are applicable as interpretive tools for appraising early swastika and moon rock art. Ideological transference between this kind of rock art and Yungdrung Bon may simply have been too diffuse to postulate clear-cut correspondences.



Fig. 5. The counterclockwise swastika and crescent moon amid a host of other figures, Lha ris sgrub phug, (Shan rtsa County /G.yag pa). Protohistoric period. These two symbols are included in an assortment of key figures, among which is a sun, crescent moon, two trees, raptor with outstretched wings, what may be an anthropomorphic couple, wild yak and several other wild herbivores, archer, and a row of four triangular subjects (ritual structures?). The uppermost animal in the photograph is a raptor created in a style (diamond-shaped wings and triangular body and tail) also seen in far western Tibet, Spiti and Ladakh. The Tibetan letter *A* at the top of the image was made in a later period.

Most of these sundry figures appear to have been painted by the same artist.⁹ The array of protean symbols (sun, moon, swastika, tree), vital economic structures (wild ungulates, hunter), cultic emblems (raptor, triangular subjects), and social constructs (couple) conveys a panorama of the life and culture of its maker, furnishing us with an extraordinary view of ancient Upper Tibet. In general terms this recalls the Yungdrung Bon leitmotif, 'the swastika of life'. Again, it is unclear

⁹ On this rock art, also see Suolang Wangdui 1994, p. 134 (fig. 161). This author calls the site: Lha-mtsho lung-pa.

how early beliefs permeating the rock art in fig. 5 may have specifically impacted Yungdrung Bon doctrine and mythology. The semantics of ancient images belonging to archaic religious traditions were not per force translatable into the written word.



Fig. 6. Three counterclockwise swastikas (one above, two below) rendered in a white pigment (probably oxides of calcium) painted on a bluish (probably oxides of manganese) and yellow ochre (oxides of iron) background. In between the swastikas are 'flaming jewels' (*nor bu me 'bar*) in white and red ochre. Below the lower swastikas is the Tibetan letter A. Rta mchog ngang pa do, Gnam mtsho (Dpal mgon County/Gnam ru). Vestigial period.

The flaming jewels motif belongs to an older style of depiction (also seen in *thog lcags* talismans) and is recognizable as a Yungdrung Bon religious symbol, as are the swastikas and mystic letter A. This composition directly links Upper Tibetan rock art to still viable Yungdrung Bon artistic conventions. These pictographs and the inscription date to the Vestigial period, the final phase of traditional rock art production

in Upper Tibet. The Yungdrung Bon religion, as it is known today, was established in the same time frame as the rock art in fig. 6. Cult activities and personalities referred to as *bon*/Yungdrung Bon are described in a Buddhist religious history of the Gnam mtsho region, the *Stag lung chos 'byung*. According to this text, these heretical practitioners were killed off or converted to Buddhism in the first half of the 13th century CE.¹⁰ This historical event is the *terminus ante quem* for *bon*/Yungdrung Bon rock art in the region. Ostensible interconnections between the composition in fig. 6 and Yungdrung Bon doctrine serve as a departure point for considering that older phases of rock art embodied rudiments of Yungdrung Bon narratives, doctrines and customs, as part of an unbroken line of Tibetan artistic and cultural transmission.

The Stepped Shrine

Ritual or ceremonial structures with a stepped or graduated profile are well known in both Yungdrung Bon and Buddhism, and are well represented in the rock art of Upper Tibet. I have catalogued more than 250 examples at 37 different sites.¹¹ The most elementary in form are those known as *gsas mkhar*, *lha tho* and by numerous other names. These types of structures often enshrine local protective and ancestral deities. More elaborate tiered shrines are traditionally called *mchod rten* and serve as models of the enlightened mind, cosmograms, memorials, and reliquaries. The precise functions of stepped shrines in the rock art of Upper Tibet are debatable. Due to crucial changes in the religious-scape of Tibet over the last 1200 years, modern-day conceptions cannot be expected to neatly match those that surrounded ancient stepped shrines in rock art.¹²

For the purposes of this article, I have chosen stepped shrine rock art dating to the Early Historic period (older examples in Upper Tibet are not treated here). The selected examples are all accompanied by the reverse swastika, an explicit sign of *bon* or non-Buddhist religious associations. The illustrated specimens represent old-fashioned depictions of monuments, which are at variance with modern architectural and iconometric plans. This rock art acts as an excellent indicator of the evolution of religious monuments in Tibet until the rise of Yungdrung Bon.

¹⁰ For these narrations, see Bellezza 1997, pp. 167–173.

¹¹ For findings of a comprehensive survey of stepped shrines in the rock art of Upper Tibet, see Bellezza in press-a. Also see examples in Suolang Wangdai 1994.

¹² For a survey of the physical remains of actual ancient stepped shrines in Upper Tibet, see Bellezza 2014a.



Fig. 7. What appears to be the portrayal of a ritual structure, featuring a wide pedestal, short stem, semicircular midsection, broad entablature, and tricuspidate finial. To the left of this subject there is a five-pointed star and counterclockwise (*g.yon skor*) swastika that are part of the same composition, as seen in the uniform style of painting, pigment color and wear characteristics. Bkra shis do chung ('Dam gzhung County/Gnam mtsho). A comparable subject at the same site appended to a mantric inscription indicates that this rock art belongs to the Early Historic period.

This particular style of what appears to be a ritual construction has not survived in Yungdrung Bon art of today. Rather, it is an obsolete representation, the precise functions of which are obscure. The star is a symbol of meteoric metal in Yungdrung Bon iconography, but it is not known if the pictographic star was assigned that meaning. In the period in which this rock art was made, the orientation of swastikas took on sectarian overtones. The counterclockwise version came to be associated with *bon* and the clockwise variety with Buddhism, a sectarian distinction largely maintained to the present day.



Fig. 8. A pair of red ochre stepped shrines with tall, interconnected base, graduated tiers, tear-drop-shaped midsection and simple mast. A counterclockwise swastika rises above the two shrines. This composition was painted inside the ancient cave sanctuary of Sgar gsol brag phug (Shen rtsa County/Nag tshang). Early Historic period.

This is another example of a stepped shrine form that was not retained in the Yungdrung Bon artistic canon. As with fig. 7 (and many other rock art specimens in Upper Tibet), this demonstrates that religious architecture advanced over time in Tibet, assuming modern proportions only after ca. 1000 CE. That standard forms of Yungdrung Bon *mchod rten* do not occur in the ancient rock art of Upper Tibet drives home the fact that they have a relatively late genesis as part of the prevailing religious milieu. Along with considerable differences in design, it might be expected that functions accorded stepped shrines also underwent modification after the Early Historic period.¹³

¹³ Likewise, there is substantial divergence in the ideological and practical currents of Old Tibetan and Classical Tibetan ritual traditions. For comparative studies, see Bellezza 2008; 2010; 2013a; 2014e; Karmay 1998; Stein 2010.



Fig. 9. A more complex stepped shrine painted in red ochre, O rgyan phug, Bkra shis do chung ('Dam gzhung County/Gnam mtsho). Early Historic period. As with other examples illustrated in this article, the red ochre counterclockwise swastika is an integral part of the composition.

The five-tired base (*bang rim*) and rounded midsection (*bum pa*) resemble more modern variants of the *mchod rten*, however, the spire (*'khor lo*) and finial (*tog*) are unconventional in form. The squat spire topped by two thick prongs belongs to an extinct style of architectural depiction.



Fig. 10. With its multi-tiered base, rounded midsection, cigar-shaped spire, forked finial, and long, flowing banners (*dar thag*), this polychrome stepped shrine resembles more closely those of the Yungdrung Bon tradition. Brag khung mdzes po (Nyi ma County/Nag tshang). Early Historic period.

Numerous design parallels with Yungdrung Bon variants notwithstanding, this stepped shrine is an unorthodox or precursory facsimile. The spire is too short, the midsection excessively small, and the base not stepped enough to belong to the religion of today. Yet, these features are repeated in other Upper Tibetan stepped shrine rock art of the same period. They are indicative of widely circulating styles of depiction in the Early Historic period. The prototypical appearance of these stepped shrine strongly suggests that they are predecessors of Yungdrung Bon *mchod rten* of the post-1000 CE era. These antecedent depictions reveal that the architectural and iconometric standardization of the *mchod rten*, as seen in Yungdrung Bon and Tibetan Buddhism, postdates the Early Historic period.



Fig. 11. An intricately painted *mchod rten* with three counterclockwise swastikas flanking it and two swastikas in the third tier of the base.¹⁴ Bkra shis do chung ('Dam gzhung County/Gnam mtsho). Early Historic period. Some of the nine or ten layers of the lower portion of the pictograph are segmented into small squares. The small midsection tapers inwards and is topped by an arrow-shaped spire. The crown consists of forked lines with a rounded prong in the center, resembling the horns of the bird, sword of the bird (*bya ru bya gri*) finial of Yungdrung Bon. Two curling banners extend from the half-circular rain cover (*char khebs*) below the finial.

Like fig. 10, this specimen is comparable to Yungdrung Bon *mchod rten*, but it is decidedly more old-fashioned in appearance. Forked finials

¹⁴ On this *mchod rten* and a proximate inscription, see Bellezza 2000a, pp. 40, 41; 2000b.

are common in stepped shrine rock art in Upper Tibet, some of which are of protohistoric antiquity. This suggests that Yungdrung Bon accounts of the horns of the bird motif, particularly in the Upper Tibetan kingdom of Zhang zhung, are based on an authentic recollection of the distant past. Although Yungdrung Bon created its own historical narrative for the motif, it did so by referencing a pre-existing religious custom. As we shall see, longstanding continuity in specific artistic motifs and subjects is supported by early horned eagle rock art in Upper Tibet.

The Priest

Constancy in Upper Tibetan rock art motifs and subjects and probably elements of the mytho-ritual and narrative structures undergirding them carries over into anthropomorphic depiction. Yungdrung Bon literature is laden with descriptions of priests and adepts such as the *gshen*, *bon/bon po* and *dpon gsas*, who are purported to have lived in prehistoric times. Some accounts of their dress, ornaments, implements and other attributes are quite detailed.¹⁵ Deities are customarily portrayed wearing the same costumes and ornaments as humans.¹⁶ Commonly occurring outer dress in Yungdrung Bon texts includes the animal skin greatcoat (*slag pa*), feathered or hide overcoat (*thul pa*), *ral ga* (gown of cloth), and the woman's mantle (*la'u*), etc. Headgear is said to have consisted of various kinds of turbans (*thod*), helmets (*rmog*), peaked headdresses (*go cog*), bird horn crowns (*bya ru*), and feathers (*bya spu*), etc. Many of these kinds of coats and headgear are noted in Old Tibetan literature, pushing back reference to them as far as the 8th or 9th century CE.¹⁷

For the pre-7th century CE period, the rock art of Upper Tibet supplies graphic evidence for styles of dress consonant with textual references.¹⁸ However, verification that the exact same types of clothing for ancient personalities are intended is elusive, because rock art depictions tend to be rudimentary, lacking careful treatment of the cut and

¹⁵ For these descriptions, see, for example, Norbu 2009; Bellezza 2001; 2008; Karmay 1972.

¹⁶ On iconographical comparison of adepts and deities in Yungdrung Bon, see Bellezza 2005, pp. 223, 234.

¹⁷ Various Dunhuang and Gathang Bumpa manuscripts dealing with non-Buddhist mytho-ritual traditions provide brief descriptions of the appearance of *gshen* and *bon* priests. For example, a description of the *ral ga*-clad archetypal priest Gshen rab myi bo (attributed with founding the Yungdrung Bon religion in later sources) is found in the *Byol rabs* text of the Gathang Bumpa collection. See Bellezza 2010, pp. 84, 85.

¹⁸ Some examples are illustrated in Bellezza 2014d.

materials involved. Indeed, many anthropomorphs are so cursorily rendered that few anatomical or cultural traits are discernable.



Fig. 12. A pair of anthropomorphic figures whose pose mimics one another, as if simulating a dance or some other kind of orchestrated activity. The pair is flanked by two counterclockwise swastikas, once more hinting at the long-term importance of this symbol on the Western Tibetan Plateau. The red ochre used to make the pictographs is unusually dark in color. Srin mo kha gdang, Spiti. Protohistoric period.

The rock art of Srin mo kha gdang, a hard-to-reach cavern near the summit of a mountain, is cultic in nature, and almost entirely devoid of pedestrian scenes such as hunting and pastoralism. The composition in fig. 12 may have conveyed any manner of activities with ritualistic, mythological or narrative undercurrents. The two swastikas enhance the extraordinary or sacred quality of the scene, whatever that might have been. Although the textual use of the word *swastika* as a designate for non-Buddhist religious traditions appears to postdate the Imperial period,¹⁹ it is clear from the rock art of Upper Tibet and other western regions of the Plateau that this symbol loomed large over religious groups of the prehistoric era.

¹⁹ A precedential occurrence is seen in the Gathang Bumpa manuscript known as *Gnag rabs*: “profound instructions of the swastika *gshen*” (*g.yung drung gshen gyi man ngag*). See Bellezza 2014e, pp. 207, 208.



Fig. 13. A lone figure with avian and anthropomorphic qualities. Mtha' kham pa ri (Ru thog County/Ru thog rdzong). Protohistoric period.

This figure stands on two legs from which lines spread out like the fringe of a skirt. In the middle of its diamond-shaped torso is a diamond motif set between two triangles. On the right side of the body is an oblong form. The head is triangular with two sinuous lines curling outward at ear level. Two long, hornlike lines surmount the top of the head. These carved motifs lend themselves to comparison with traits of ancient priests enumerated in Yungdrung Bon and Old Tibetan literature. For instance, one might compare the bird-like skirt to a vulture feather overcoat (*bya rgod kyi thul pa*), the oblong form to a drum (*rnga*), the ear-level lines to ribbons (*go pan*), and the headdress to the bird horn crown (*bya ru*).²⁰ While none of these identifications is certain, Ti-

²⁰ On the use of the *bya ru* crown by ancient sages and kings of Zhang zhung, see, for example, Martin, pp. 134–136; Vitali 2008; Norbu 1989; Bellezza 2008, *passim*. The

betan texts provide the best interpretive framework available (the discovery of actual objects notwithstanding), for they refer to the time (prehistoric era) and place (Upper Tibet).

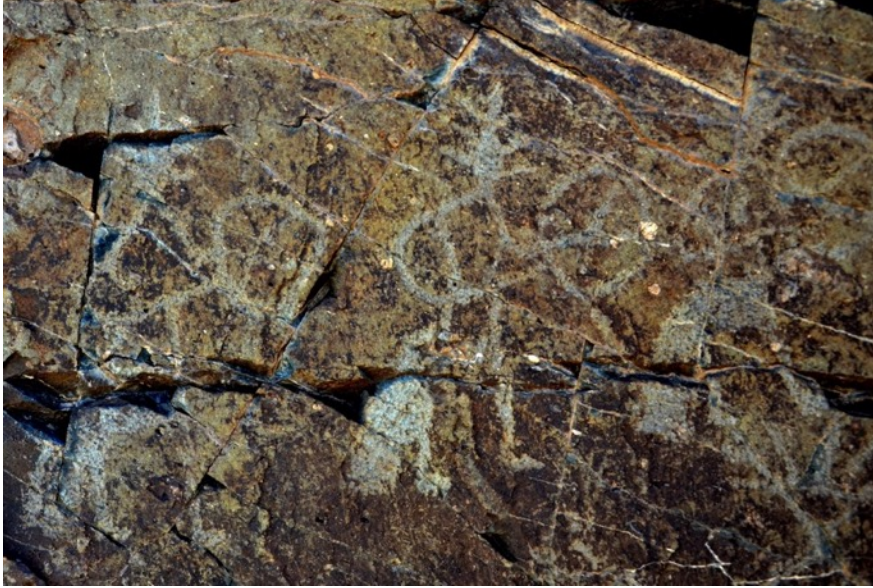


Fig. 14. Three priestly figures in a row beating what appear to be drums. The head of a similar figure with feather-like headdress is visible at the lower right corner of the photograph, one of a number of other extraordinary anthropomorphs on the same rock panel. Mtha' kham pa ri (Ru thog County / Ru thog rdzong). Protohistoric period.

The three figures have elaborate pronged headdresses recalling feathers or plumes. According to the Yungdrung Bon textual tradition, feathers and plumes (*bya phod*) were erected on the head of a variety of ancient priests. For example, it is written that feathers of the lammergeyer (*thang dkar*) served as an insignia awarded to sages for outstanding duty by the kings of protohistoric Tibet.²¹ Contemporary spirit-mediums (*lha pa*) in Upper Tibet still stick a downy plume of lammergeyer feathers into their hats (*btsan zhwa*). The circular instrument held in the left hand of the carved figures strongly resembles a drum, particularly since contact is being made with a linear object, denoting the right arm and/or a drumstick. The drum continues to be the musical instrument

oldest textual references to bird horns (*byu ru* and *khyung ru*) occur in archaic funerary ritual manuscripts written in Old Tibetan, often as equestrian psychopomp headdresses. See Bellezza 2008, pp. 506, 507, 509, 522; 2013, pp. 69 (n. 90), 207, 230–232.

²¹ For this and other references to headdresses with feathers, see Bellezza 2005, pp. 108 (n. 97).

of choice in Tibetan ritualism. The quadripartite arrangement of the circular motif is reminiscent of shamanic drums used throughout Inner Asia. Each figure has a tail-like extension in the rear, presumably a type of dress or zoomorphic flourish.



Fig. 15. An adept or priest painted in red ochre more than half life size (1.1 m in height). Sgar gsol brag phug (Shan rtsa County/Nag tshang). Early Historic Period. The standing male figure is attired in a tight-fitting shirt and what appears to be a tiger skin loincloth (*stag sham*). The upper garment has a low collar, tight fitting sleeves and opens along the middle of the chest. A turban is wound around the head and prominent topknot (*thor gtsug*) of the figure. Large hoop earrings hang from drooping ears and the eyes and mouth are semi-circular. The figure wields a hook (*lcakyyu*) in the right hand and appears to be holding a coiled lasso (*zhags pa*) in the left. He wears low-slung footwear or what might be anklets.

This pictograph with its many details is a rich source of information concerning ancient sacerdotal garb. The dress and coiffure of this figure suggest that he is depicted in the fashion of a brahman (*bram ze*), as was the famous eighth-century CE master who resided at Gnam

mtsho, Stong rgyung mthu chen, according to Yungdrung Bon texts. Like stepped shrine rock art, this pictograph anticipates Yungdrung Bon iconographic conventions that emerged ca. 1000 CE. This is not surprising in that there are numerous ideological and procedural affinities between Old Tibetan and Yungdrung Bon mytho-ritual literature, despite the differing religious orientations.



Fig. 16. Another large priestly or divine figure painted inside Sgar gsol brag phug (Shan rtsa County/Nag tshang). Early Historic Period. This individual is depicted with a tall, pointed crown or topknot, a pair of prominent fangs, odd-shaped ears, cat-like pupils, and flexed arms and legs. He does not appear to wear any clothing. Note the counterclockwise swastika above the left hand of the figure, which seems to be an integral part of the composition.

The headdress of this anthropomorph is somewhat reminiscent of Buddhist tantric accoutrements like the central portion of the *rigs Inga* crown heaped around a topknot. Likewise, the wrathful appearance of the figure may possibly have been inspired by an emerging tantric tradition in Tibet. Nevertheless, the iconography of the figure is unique, seemingly an antetype for the rendering of gods and saints in the Yungdrung Bon attitude. The crude execution of the portrait suggests that it was painted by local inhabitants, registering religious activities and personalities associated with the large cave sanctuary of Sgar gsol brag phug. A Rnying ma monastery, Dpal gzims phug, was founded in the region by Blo gros mtha' yas, in 1095 CE.²² The foundation of this monastery seems to mark definitive control of the region by Buddhist adherents.

The Horned Eagle

The horned eagle or *khyung* is one of Tibet's most iconic creatures. Like other carnivorous birds (hawks, vultures, falcons, and owls, etc.), it is a facet of many Tibetan narratives, myths and rituals. The *khyung* has come to play a role in a broad range of Yungdrung Bon and Buddhist doctrines. It is the winged mount of various protective deities, as well as standing alone as a protector (*srung ma*) and tutelary deity (*yi dam*). The *khyung* often accompanies enlightened gods as a member of their retinue, occupying the highest position around the throne. Associated with the fire element and space, the *khyung* is commonly propitiated to counteract diseases attributed to the water spirits (*klu*). Its horns are said to possess demon destroying properties. In both Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon, the *khyung* is the main zoomorphic emblem of the profound philosophical and mind training tradition known as the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen).

The *khyung* has dual historico-cultural origins: indigenous and Indian (cf. Tucci 1973: 36). Its Indian ancestry is as the *garuda*, a flying creature with the wings and tail of a raptor and the arms and body of a human. With the advance of Hinduism and Buddhism across eastern and southeastern Asia, the *garuda* spread widely. Reaching Tibet with the introduction of Buddhism in the Early Historic period, the *garuda* became assimilated to the *khyung*, displacing earlier religious lore associated with this mythic bird-of-prey.

Yungdrung Bon has retained numerous accounts of the *khyung*, the king of birds (*bya rgyal*), set in the prehistoric era. Some of these tales

²² On this monastery and proximate archaeological sites at Dgon ro dmar lding, see Bellezza 2014a, pp. 399–402.

have a Buddhist ring to them like those describing the transformation of sages into *khyung* as a prelude to ultimate liberation. Tantric forms of the *khyung* in the Me ri and Ge khod cycles are replete with ideas and imagery shared with Buddhism. Even the pentad of *khyung* that reside at Mount Ti se in the Yungdrung Bon Mother Tantra (Ma rgyud) are overlaid by a thick Buddhist-like philosophical mantle. However, Yungdrung Bon has also preserved what appears to be older religious lore of the *khyung*, functioning as genealogical and uranic protective spirits. The best known defender *khyung* are in the form of territorial spirits (*yul lha*), masters of places (*gzhi bdag*) and warrior spirits (*sgra bla/dgra lha*), allies of ancient adepts and kings in various tales. Texts relating the mythic origins of the Khyung po clan (*khyung rabs*) declare that the horned eagle first appeared as a divine progenitor in Zhang zhung.²³ In these accounts, human scions of the Khyung po clan are credited with establishing the first temples (*gsas mkhar*) of Zhang zhung. The *khyung* also functioned as a psychopomp in archaic funerary rituals.²⁴ The oldest references in Old Tibetan literature to this raptor and its feathers appear to be of Imperial-period antiquity (see Pt 1136, Pt 1194, ITJ 738, etc.). The Kyung po clan is mentioned in both Old Tibetan texts and rock inscriptions found in Ru thog. In Yungdrung Bon texts, prehistoric *gshen* and *bon* priests are reputed to have worn robes and hats of *khyung* feathers, and to have had magical instruments and armaments made from the body parts of these great birds. In the *Ti se'i dkar chag* (written by Dkar ru grub dbang bstan 'dzin, mid-19th century) the horns of the *khyung* are recorded as the paramount symbol of sovereignty for the kings of Zhang zhung. Moreover, the *khyung* has lent its name to numerous toponyms in the Tibetan world, probably the most famous of which is Khyung lung dngul/rngul mkhar, a capital of the Zhang zhung kingdom.

²³ On *khyung rabs* literature, see Bellezza 2008, pp. 288, 289.

²⁴ On *khyung* as funerary protective deities, see *ibid.*, 2013a, 68–70. The horns of the *khyung* (*khyung ru*) are mentioned in two funerary ritual texts from Dunhuang, Pt 1136 and Pt 1194. In this Old Tibetan literary context, the horns of the *khyung* work as an instrument for subjugating demons interfering with the passage of the dead to the celestial afterlife. See Bellezza 2008, pp. 506–509, pp. 518–522.



Fig. 17. A red ochre *khyung* with prominent horns almost forming a circle, a head that appears to point to the right, long, narrow body, upraised wings, and bell-shaped tail. Ra ma do, north shore of Gnam mtsho (Dpal mgon County). Protohistoric period.

This highly worn pictograph is one of at least 16 horned eagles I have documented in the rock art of Upper Tibet. Nearly all examples show the *khyung* with spread wings soaring in magnificent isolation, as part of a well developed tradition of zoomorphic portraiture in the region. These carvings and paintings are situated across Upper Tibet and vary in age from the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age to the historic era. Given its wide spatial and temporal distribution, the horned eagle is truly an iconic subject.²⁵ It is in the Early Historic period that the *khyung* of rock

²⁵ On *khyung* rock art in Upper Tibet, see Bruneau and Bellezza, pp. 28, 66, 67; Bellezza 2001, p. 358 (fig. 10.78); 2008, p. 172 (fig. 303), 175 (fig. 310); 2002, p. 216 (fig. XI-17c), 217 (XI-17c, 18c), 221 (XI-26c), 234 (XI-4e, 5e); 2015c; 2013b; 2012a; in press.

art and texts converge chronologically, illustrating its pervasiveness in the Tibetan world of that time. Furthermore, rock art corroborates the prehistoric status of the horned eagle as presented in Tibetan literature. Although pictographs and petroglyphs of horned eagles cannot be related infallibly to specific accounts in Old Tibetan and Yungdrung Bon literature, the themes conveyed in them are likely to resonate with rock art depictions, serving as a broad-based tool of identification and analysis.



Fig. 18. *Khyung* with double-curved horns, triangular beak facing left, outstretched wings, bi-triangular body, and fan-shaped tail. Sum mdo 2 (Spiti). Probably Iron Age.

This adeptly rendered carving is one of four or five horned eagles in the rock art of Spiti, in styles directly comparable to that of Upper Tibet and Ladakh.²⁶ This Spitian rock art is both painted and carved. The double-curved horns in fig. 18 recall a motif in wild yak (*'brong*) rock art of the same period (see fig. 20). Horned eagle rock art in Spiti is one of several subjects (e.g., mascoids, animal style art, wild yak hunters,

²⁶ See Bellezza 2015b, figs. 14–18; in press. In the rock art of Ladakh there are at least seven examples of raptors with outstretched wings depicted with horns (Vernier and Bruneau 2017: 325 [fig. c]).

etc.) that ally this region culturally to its larger Plateau neighbors in the east and north, beginning as early as the Late Bronze Age. The areal distribution of *khyung* rock art potentially corroborates Yungdrung Bon literary assertions regarding this creature as the symbol par excellence of Zhang zhung and may possibly provide signposts delimiting its territorial extent.

The Animal Mount

Yungdrung Bon and Buddhism are replete with descriptions of the animal mounts upon which deities and adepts are carried. These zoomorphic vehicles are part of both Indic and indigenous religious expressions in Tibet. A wide variety of animals are represented and it is not unusual for a single god or goddess to have more than one at their disposal. Of special interest to this study are the conveyances of native protective deities that inhabit the sky, land and water. These include wild yaks, antelopes, raptors, bears, wolves, other large carnivores, and many other species. Especially suggestive of the Upper Tibetan cultural and environmental context is the wild yak, the largest mammal endemic to the Tibetan Plateau. In the Yungdrung Bon and popular mytho-ritual framework, the wild yak (male and female) is one of the most common vehicles of mountain gods, lake goddesses and other protective deities such as the father god (*pho lha*), mother goddess (*mo lha*) and warrior god (*dgra lha*).

In numinous form, the wild yak serves as an emanation of many kinds of divinities.²⁷ Most typical of this class of zoomorphic spirits is the white wild yak celestial spirit (*lha 'brong dkar po*), a *dgra lha* that is believed to inhabit sacred mountains all over Tibet. Among the oldest literary references are found in a Dunhuang text (Pt 126) and probably date to the Imperial period: male yak celestial spirit (*lha g.yag sham po*) and female yak celestial spirit (*lha 'bri zal mo*). It seems likely that some of the hundreds of prehistoric portraits of solitary wild yaks in the rock art of Upper Tibet are supramundane versions of this species. However, it is seldom possible to differentiate these from more ordinary manifestations.

On the other hand, there is a genre of rock art in Upper Tibet in which anthropomorphic figures are mounted on wild yaks.²⁸ It is this kind of composition that anticipates the literary trope of divine and

²⁷ For extensive coverage of wild yak mounts and spirits in the textual and folk traditions of Upper Tibet, consult Bellezza 2005; 2008.

²⁸ For a survey of this rock art, see Bellezza 2012b. On wild yak rock art more generally, see Bellezza 2016b; 2017.

priestly personalities riding wild bovids in Tibet. Again, it must be stressed that relating this rock art to the literary record in anything but general terms is a provisional exercise.



Fig. 19. An anthropomorphic figure mounted on a wild yak. Skyil grum (Dge rgyas County/Tshwa kha). Iron Age.

There are a number of examples of anthropomorphic figures mounted on wild yaks in the rock art of at least four different sites in Upper Tibet. This style of yak with barbed tail and belly fringe is common in Upper Tibet, and appears to designate wild male variants of the species. Riding wild or bull yaks is not practicable, obviating an ordinary human identity for riders in this genre of rock art.



Fig. 20. Two wild yaks with what appear to be highly stylized riders. In this rendering the wild yaks have wedge-shaped tails and double-curved horns. Skyil grum (Dge rgyas County / Tshwa kha). Iron Age.

Whether depicting divine, heroic or priestly riders, or something entirely different, it appears that wild yaks were already seen as magical carriers in the prehistoric era, as they still are in contemporary Tibetan religious belief.

Conclusion

Archaeological and literary sources attest to the interplay of figurative and symbolic traditions in Tibet from deep in prehistory until the present day. When Upper Tibetan rock art is viewed in its entirety, strong iconographic patterns emerge, constituting a body of cultural materials amenable to comparison with written accounts. It can be concluded that the presence of the swastika, stepped shrine, priest, horned eagle, and rider of the wild yak in contemporary Tibetan religions is a by-product of long-lived customs on the Tibetan Plateau. Rock art, textual records and Yungdrung Bon classical art comprise coherent assemblages of these key subjects with manifold parallels in outward form.

The persistence exhibited by the figures and symbols under examination argues in favor of ideological correlates linking the prehistoric and historic eras. Although the meaning attached to these representations was modified by historical developments associated with the introduction of Buddhism, there was no complete break with earlier artistic conceptions and models. Nevertheless, the spread of Buddhism in the Early Historic period had a huge impact on the trajectory of culture and religion more generally in Tibet. Hence, the ritual, narrative, or mythic weight assigned subjects and emblems in Yungdrung Bon is not necessarily germane to prehistoric rock art considered in this article. Rather, Yungdrung Bon, as well as Old Tibetan literature, are best viewed as incomplete or imperfect guides to the definition and function of more ancient versions of analogous subjects.

It remains to be determined how rock art might have affected the formation of Yungdrung Bon semiology and iconography, informing them through long-established ideas and practices. In the Vestigial period, rock art was used as a platform of expression by adherents of Yungdrung Bon (or closely related localized cults) in Upper Tibet. A cross-fertilization of religious elements in the artistic and textual arenas was clearly at work at that time.

Some might read the swastikas, stepped shrines, priests, horned eagles, and wild yak riders in rock art as supporting the conventional Yungdrung Bon historical narrative, which holds that it is tantamount to a pre-10th century CE form of *bon*. Others will see this rock art as evidence helping to differentiate Yungdrung Bon from earlier religious systems in Tibet. In any case, physical forms were preserved with remarkable fidelity, while alterations to the import of swastikas, stepped shrines, priests, horned eagles, and wild yak riders occurred over the long sweep of time.

The actual degree of cultural perdurability enjoyed by the rock art under discussion remains an open question. Despite current limitations to historical appraisal, robust graphic affinities between swastikas, stepped shrines, priests, horned eagles, and wild yak riders in the rock art and textual records are undeniable. Of course, much depends on perception and what one chooses to privilege in a comparative study of the relevant sources. Yet, even setting aside questions of abstract content, the artistic interrelationships presented in this article are highly substantive in themselves. Additional inquiry promises to further enhance our understanding of the cultural and religious development of ancient Tibet.

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