

# Petroglyphs of Ladakh: The Withering Monuments

Petroglyphs (or rock art) often are remnants of lost cultures. They are records of artists, thoughts and reasonings of past times. Many are communicative and very articulate. Sometimes we can gather detailed information on the modes of life of people, about animal husbandry, farming, ancient myths and legends and general trends of past generations. There seems to be continuity from prehistory to history. During the Bronze Age, Ladakh was fully related or at least connected to the cultures of the steppe Bronze Age (Francfort et. al.). There are definitely connections between the rock carvings of Central Asia, Kashmir, Tibet, China, Mongolia etc.

The interpretation of these ancient pictures have been innumerable. Whether one chooses to view, for example, a footprint as representing a god or as symbolizing the carver; whether one sees in the carvings primarily a religious purpose or a social one, there can be little doubt that their inherent significance to our common cultural heritage derives from the fact that they never cease to fascinate and continue to inspire our desire to interpret, understand and read them. Even if nothing is conclusive of the art, it still says, "I was here."

The most pressing issue today is the conservation of these unique records. Many are succumbing to modern development, because rocks are the basic building blocks. Natural decay and vandalism are also taking their toll. Petroglyphs in Ladakh have been studied by quite a few foreign scholars, but none acted towards their conservation. A task we locals have to embark on. Your contribution in any form will be appreciated.

**Note:** The art exhibited here represents only a small fraction of the findings of Tashi Ldawa.

## About the Author:

**Tashi Ldawa Tshangspa** (40) was born in Leh, and studied mostly outside Ladakh. He completed his MSc and MPhil in Zoology at the University of Jammu. Presently he is a lecturer in Zoology in EJM college Leh. As part of his teaching engagement, for the past eight years he has written ten academic books for undergraduate students. However, his passion has been the documentation and study of the Prehistoric Rock Art of Ladakh for the last 12 years. He is the only Ladakhi to have done so. After covering more than 2000 km he still feels to have discovered only some part of all the rock art there is in Ladakh. Documentation is the first priority, before many of the carvings are lost forever.

As a result of his work, Tashi Ldawa was invited to speak at various national and international seminars. Considering the documentation and preservation of Ladakh's petroglyph heritage a pressing issue, he has kept up the work despite the fact that there has been no funding or backups from any institution. The dismal response of the authorities and related departments to take up the case of this field of archaeology has not discouraged him from fighting a lonely battle. But fortunately the art itself inspires him to continue the battle against odds.



Natural decay and vandalism.



Pure vandalism



Rocks broken down for construction



Nearby rock with important art is gone, which one is next?

**Map:** Most of the petroglyph art of Ladakh is incongruous with the present day artistic tradition. The subject matters seem to have no contemporary relevance, neither religious nor cultural. Certain peculiar styles and subjects are restricted to a particular site or route, hinting at a rich variety of local cultures. Many petroglyphs show affinity to Central Asian art. These are therefore different from the ones made by locals with somewhat uniform subject and elements. Some of the most remarkable examples are depicted on the map.

#### Glossary

**Achaemenid:** Persian empire 550-330 BC

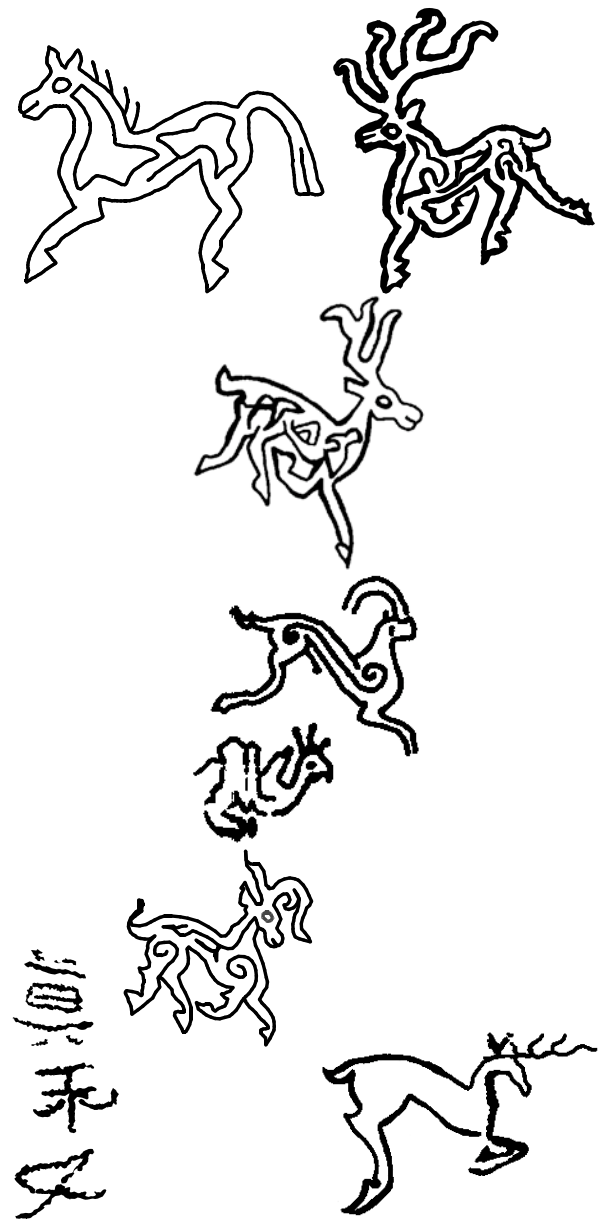
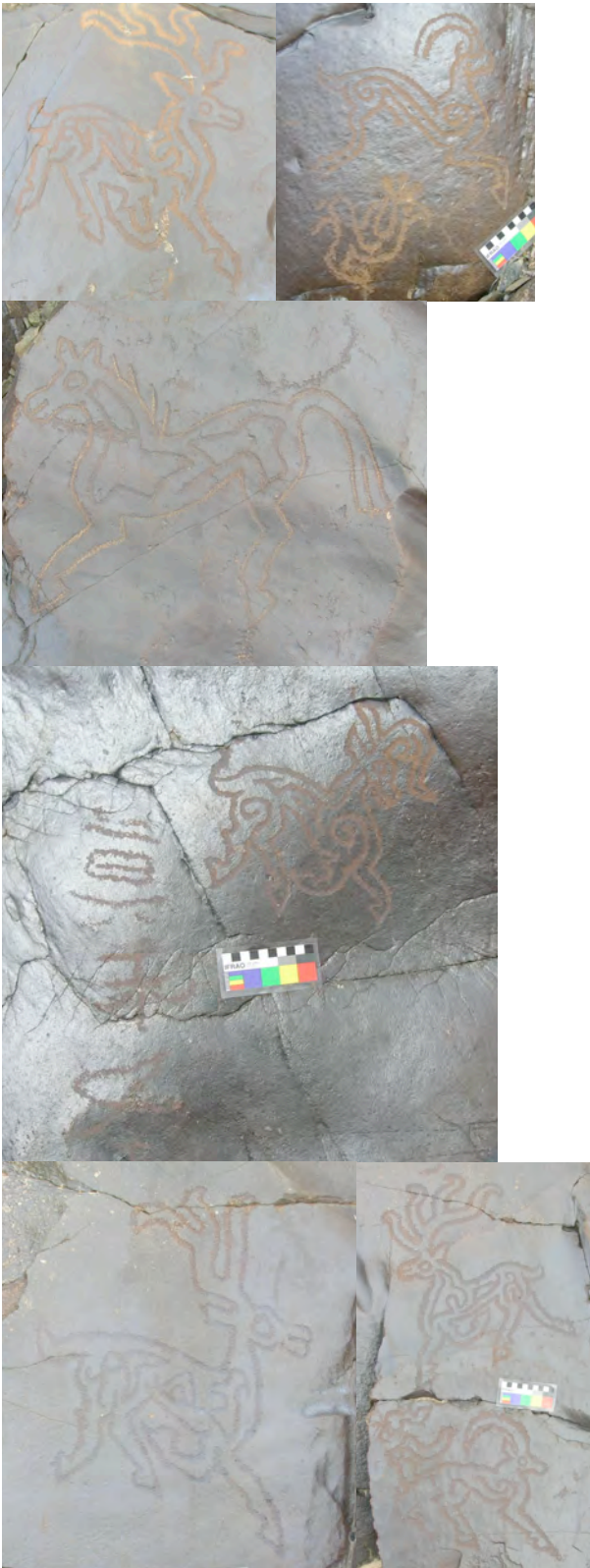
**Protohistoric:** time between the Neolithic period (New Stone Age) until the appearance of written records

**Bronze age:** prehistoric period following the Stone Age that began in the late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC

**Iron Age:** the period following the Bronze Age, starting around the first millennium BC

**Patination:** a green or brown film on the surface of objects [here stone], produced by oxidation over a long period.

Set 6

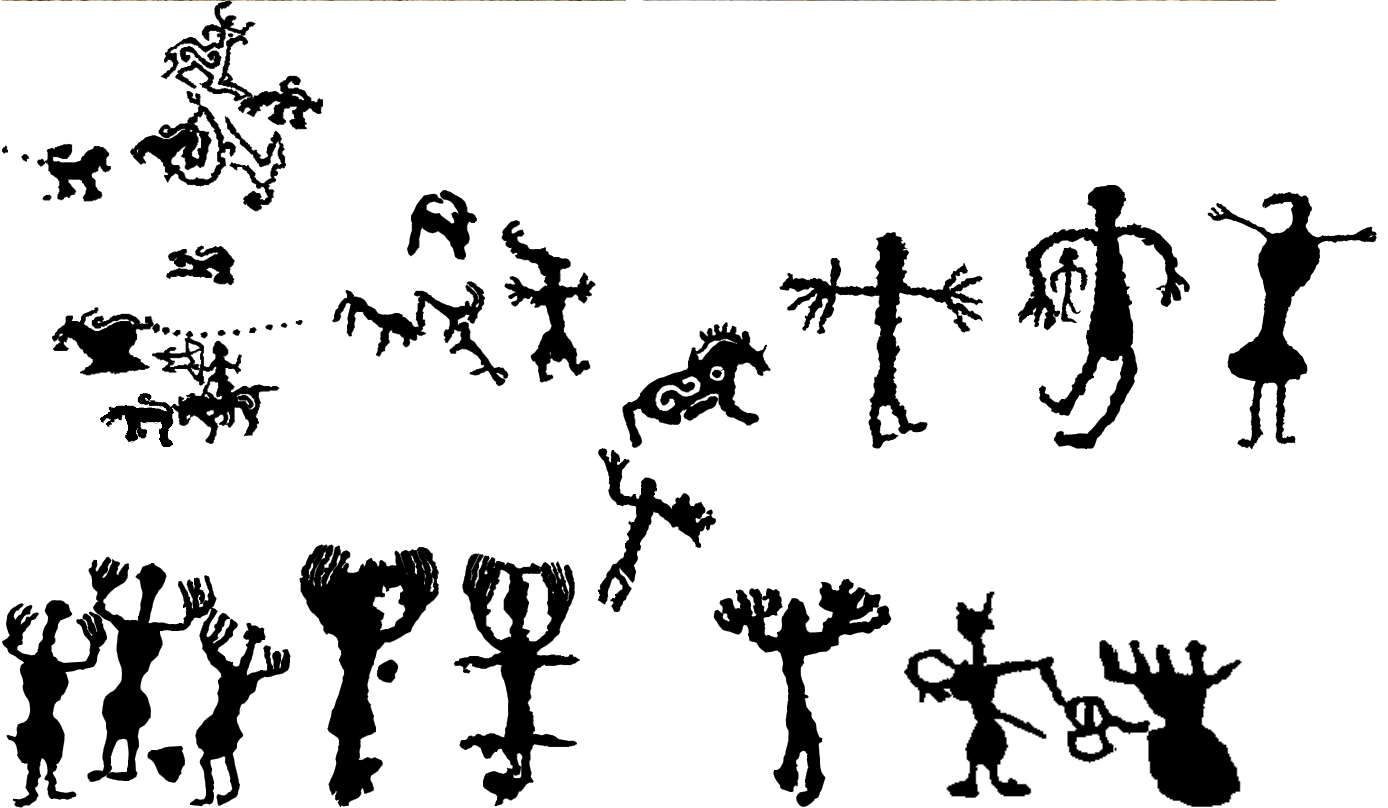


**Domkhar Sanctuary I:** A site that can be described as an anthology of rock art, one of the finest ones not only in Ladakh but also in the neighbouring countries. A yet undeciphered inscription could

lead to an understanding of its origin and purpose. Comparable images from Tuekta, in the Altai mountains are dated 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.



Set 5



**Domkhar Sanctuary II:** The animal figures shown here in full contours are probably Achaemenid (left). Comparable examples found in Thalpan's animals (Pakistan) are dated middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. Interestingly such art is also associated with anthropomorphic figures. The very high degree of patination suggests these are from the 'Pre-Buddhist' period, if not much earlier.

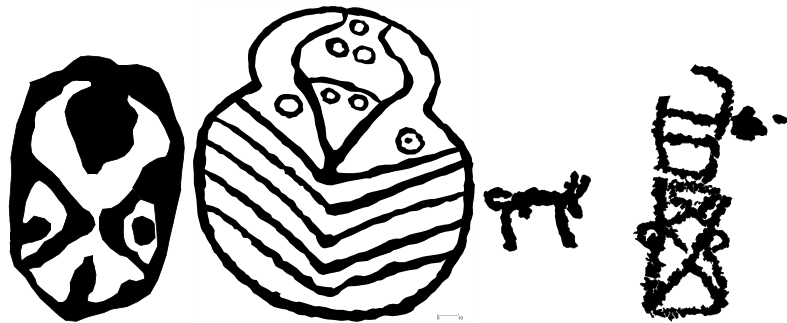
**Set 2**



**Tangtse Chase (left or upper):** A beautiful piece of art from Tangtse (Changthang). This one closely resembles a composition found in Ringmodong, Tibet, which is dated Iron Age. The deer's posture, standing on its hoofs, as well as the "S" shaped motif, are elements connected with the Scythian art of the northern steppes. The second example is from Kharu.



**Set 10**



**The 'mascoids' (Upper or left):** The mascoid (mask-like human faces) engravings are attributed to the Okunoid culture. These cattle breeders spread and interacted over thousands of kilometers during the third and early second millennium BC. The example shown here from Sasoma (Nubra) resembles images found in Mugur-Sargol (Siberia). The other rounded figure, from Shara, is one of the biggest single piece carvings found in Ladakh, about 1.5m in length.

Set 13

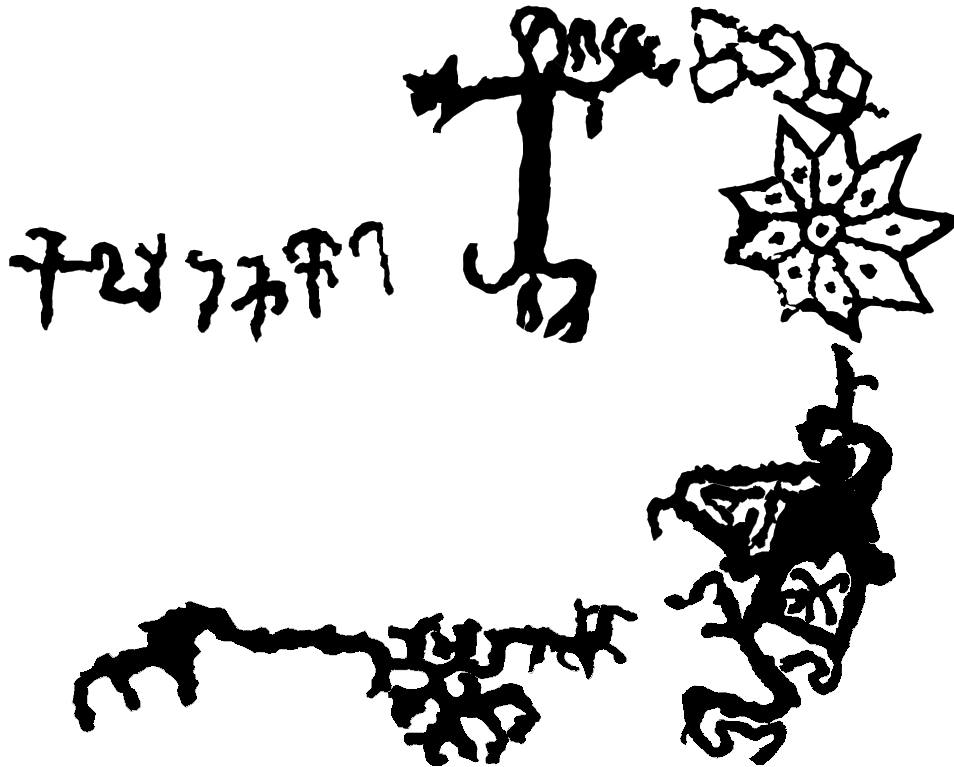






**Hunting scenes:** Hunting scenes is one of the most common subjects, still made by local inhabitants until quite recently. This example is from Kargil and shows a close semblance in style and subject to carvings found in Burzahom (Kashmir) from the Neolithic Age. The second one shows hunters along with anthropomorphic figures. Some very closely resemble figures found in the Baikal region (Siberia and Mongolia). Their patination suggests that they are at least a few thousand years old.

## Site 1



**Big Boulder of Bema:** This site actually consists of several boulders with engravings on the bank of the Indus. The most prominent one is about a size of a common room with a profusion of art on its surface. There are inscriptions (perhaps Kharoshti), symbols, anthropomorphic figures, giants, social scenes, hunting scenes and various other images. The entire site including the surrounding rocks suggests some special significance, particularly as one of the other rocks has a life-size outline of a human, as if it has been laid down there. Perhaps this was a funeral site.

## Site 12



**Dha-Bema site:** The Dha and Bema regions are unique because of the Dardic culture and race, and some of the engravings in these regions are very special too. The examples shown here so far defy interpretation.

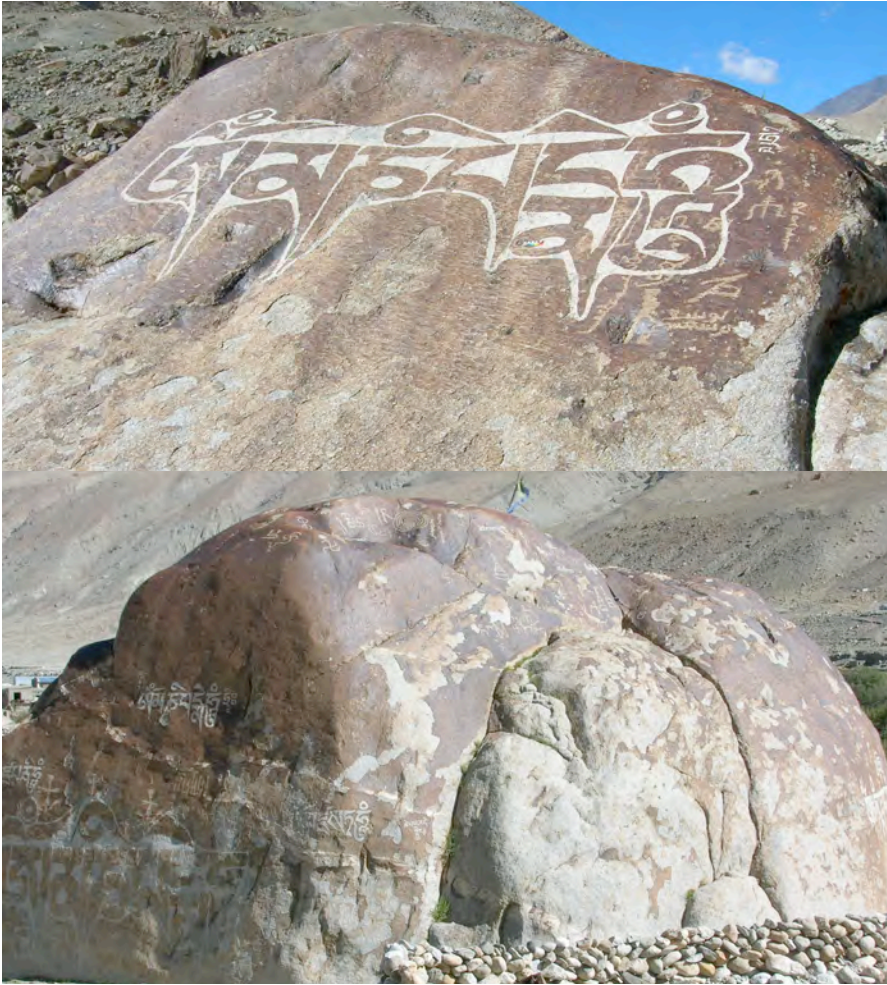


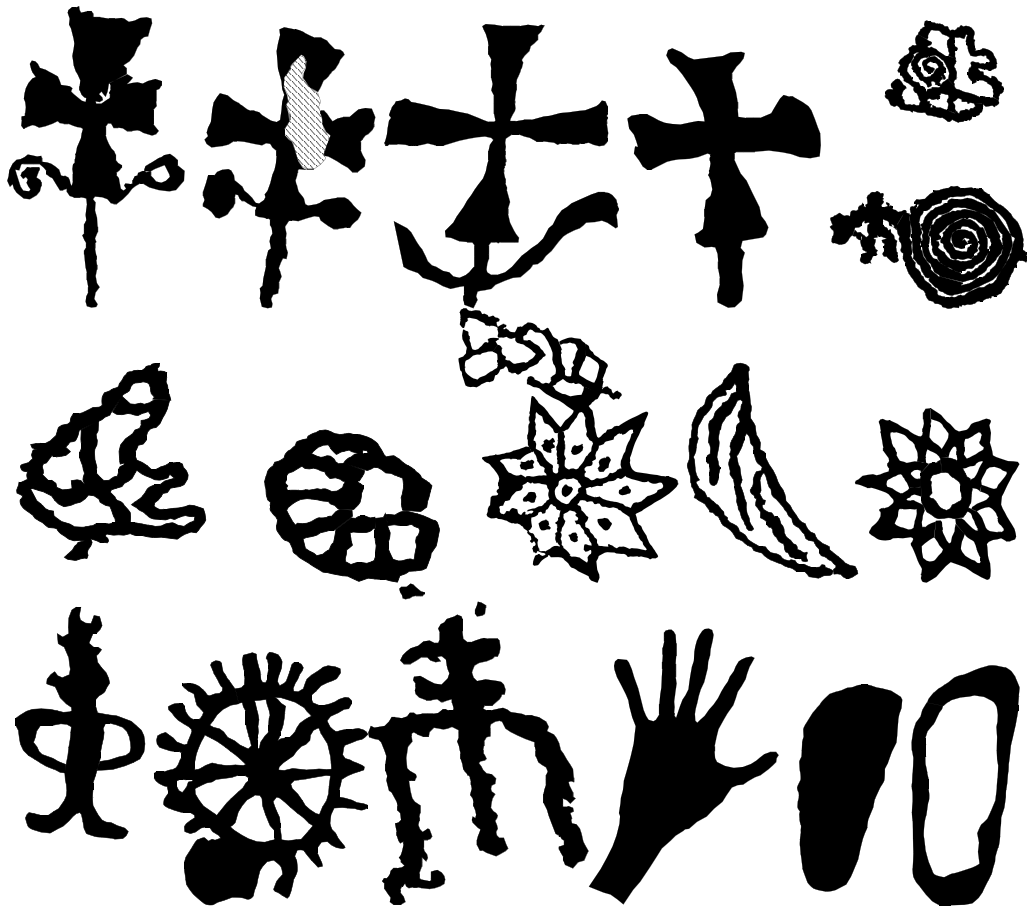
## Site 11



**Khaltse Bridge:** This site has a special historic significance as a toll point. A.H. Francke discovered here Kharoshti inscriptions dating to the first century AD, which today are found no more. But there are still many carvings on both sides of the river around the bridge. Two symmetrical lions found about 10m apart appear significant.

Site 4





**Tangtse Boulder:** There are several decorated boulders in the village of Tangtse which seems to have become a landmark for various travelers. In a striking variety of languages, we find inscriptions in Thokarian, Sogdian, Arabic, Brahmi, Sharada and Tibetan. There are various signs, tamgas, swastikas, Christian crosses (Maltese crosses) and other petroglyphs belonging to various periods in time.



### Site 3



**Giants:** Depictions of giants or some anthropomorphic super human forms can be found very often in the petroglyphs of Ladakh. This example is from Tangtse. There is some resemblance to images found in Tibet. One figure resembles the common north Asian image of a cosmic birth goddess dated to the Bronze Age.

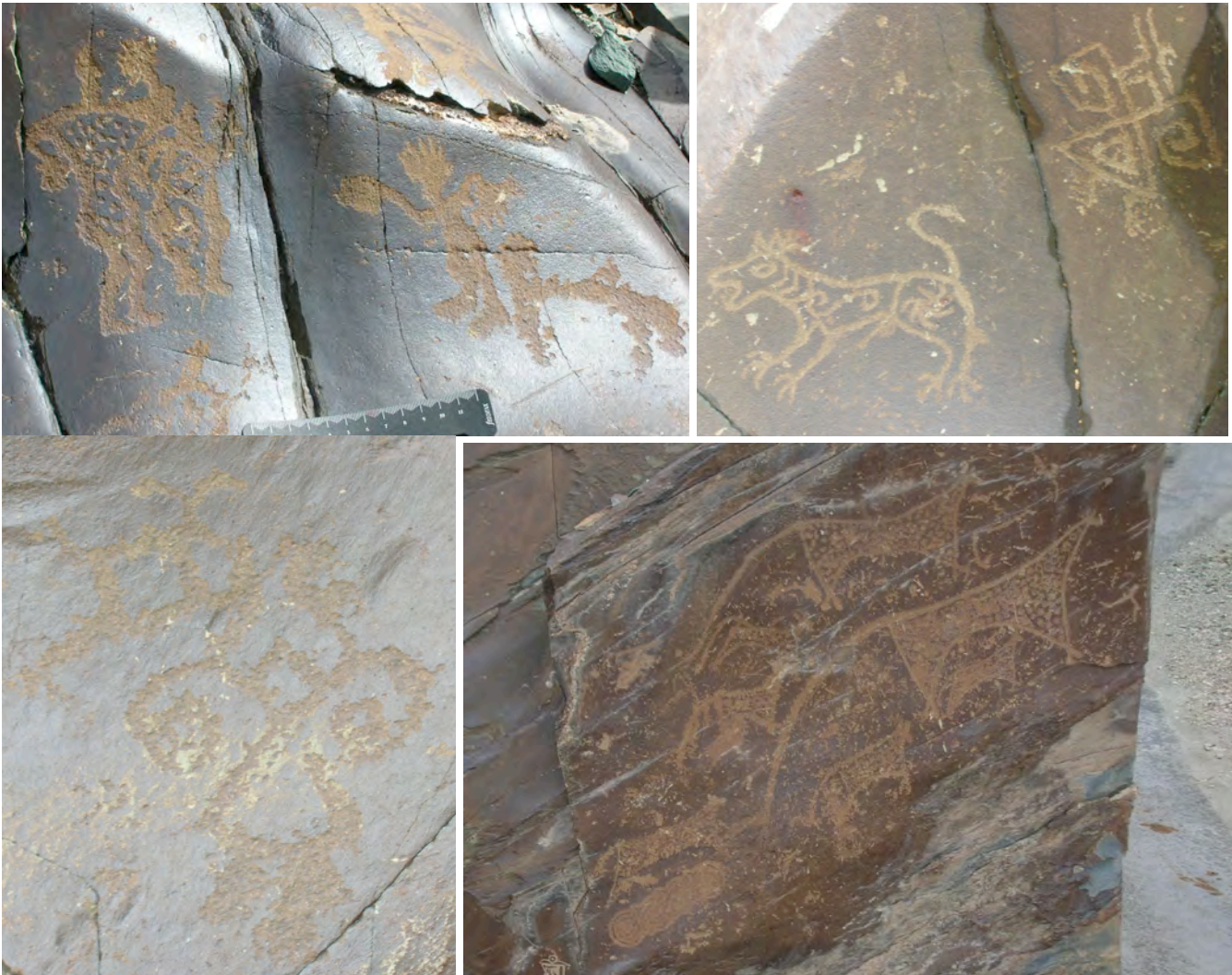
## Site 7



**Ethnic sanctuary (Bema):** The figures on a couple of rocks here in Bema can be considered a form of abstract art. The semi-invisible repatinated art on these rocks has been termed 'ethnic sanctuary' (by Vohra). These boulders, engraved with symbols and imbued with magical power, provided the appropriate atmosphere for socio-religious gatherings. Their repatination suggests second to third millennium BC.



Site 8-9



**Chilling valley:** In the Chilling valley we find images and figures that are entirely different than in other parts of Ladakh. As a rare stylistic feature, there are dots inside the body shapes. The anthropomorphic figures are probably bird heads, a peculiarity that has no parallel to guess their origin or age.