

PROBLEMS OF TIBETAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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TIBET remains a *terra incognita* for archaeologists. For decades the study of Tibetan antiquities has been the apanage of scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of Northern Buddhism. Their work consisted mostly of translation from the Tibetan, and the interpretation and reconstruction of lost Sanskrit originals with the help of the extant Tibetan translations. The rich archaeological remains of the country were left unexplored. Up to the present time, archaeological explorations have been unknown in the country of the lamas, which continues to keep its secret from the inquisitive scholar and explorer. Tibet—a country which succeeded in remaining isolated through the Middle Ages and even through modern times—is a unique store-house of antiquity and folk-lore. A thorough study and scientific survey of its town monasteries, memorial monuments or *stūpas*, and numerous and totally unexplored remains of the pre-Buddhistic period, would doubtlessly reveal an unexpected wealth of scientific data with which to reconstruct the colorful past of this unique country. Such an exploration of Tibet is bound to bring new light to the other branches of Oriental studies, such as Indology, Sinology and Central Asian philology and archaeology. A brilliant line of Western explorers has contributed to the opening of this treasure-trove of Inmost Asia. The central position occupied by Tibet and its highly mountainous character have made the country a kind of *reliquaire* of ancient Indian, Chinese and Central Asian traditions.

Northern Buddhism, strongly influenced by the Tantric schools of Medieval India, is known only from Tibetan sources, for the ancient Sanskrit canon has been almost entirely lost in India, and is preserved only in fragments in the sands of Central Asia. Ancient usages, forms of artistic expression long extinct in India proper, are still current in Tibet, and such is the influence and rigid force of its artistic tradition, that a bronze figure of the XIIIth or XIVth century A. D. can hardly be distinguished from an image belonging to the XVIIth or XVIIIth century.¹ This rigidity of tradition is in many instances more stable and immune to change than the written laws of the country.

Central Asia, with its wealth of cosmopolitan influences and the large-scale pictorial compositions of its cave temples, has left an indelible imprint on the art of fresco painting in Tibetan monasteries. A Tibetan temple fresco still recalls the masterpieces of Ajantā, though this art did not reach Tibet direct across the snow-barriers

¹ This does not refer to the bronze images of Eastern Tibet or Kham, where we find a new efflorescence of art (sculpture and painting) in the XVIIIth century, with a strong Chinese influence. This XVIIIth century art is commonly designated by the name of Sino-Tibetan art.

of the Himālayas, but came into the country through ancient Gandhāra, Bactria, and the great countries of Central Asia.²

The wealth of historical information on Tibet contained in the *Chinese Historical Annals*, should be studied together with Tibetan epigraphical and other antiquarian remains. In other words, Tibetan archaeology should be the basis of every scientific work on the medieval history of Tibet. The same applies to Mongolia, for the understanding of whose history a clear picture of the part played by Tibet is altogether essential. Written records are not sufficient to reconstruct the past of a country, and it is our firm belief that it is archaeology that will inaugurate a new era in Oriental and especially Tibetan research. By saying this I do not intend to belittle the importance of written records, but only wish to stress the value of corroborative material.

Archaeological investigations were for a long time absent from the field of Tibetan studies. European and American explorers, who braved the dangers presented by the forbidding character of the country and the animosity of its inhabitants, have paid more attention to geographical exploration, to the fauna and flora of the country, and the ethnology of its present inhabitants. This was the natural result of prevailing conditions, archaeological and historical investigations requiring more time and often a prolonged sojourn in the country, a concession which was usually refused to former explorers of Tibet. Most of these explorers achieved striking success in determining the physical structure of the country, and brought back rich collections of its fauna and flora, but were hardly qualified to explore the archaeological monuments of the country. The accounts of their travels give scant information about the antiquarian remains to be found scattered throughout Tibet. Let us hope that a more progressive age will make it possible for scholars to explore archaeologically this most fascinating country.

Whereas the provinces of Central and Eastern Tibet have long been closed to European scholars, the provinces of Indian Tibet, that is Ladāk, Zangskar, Baltistān, Skardo, Lahul, Spiti, Rupshu, and the different Himālayan border states with a Tibetan population, remained open to Western research. The first book on the archaeology of a Tibetan province was written on Ladāk by General Sir Alexander Cunningham (London, 1854). It was a valuable work for its time, but has been subsequently supplemented by the researches of the Moravian missionary, Dr. K. Marx, and especially by the late Dr. A. H. Francke. Much good work was done by E. von Schlagintweit, whose works contain valuable archaeological data. The first savant to go beyond the mere mentioning of the existence of antiquarian remains, however, was

2) I believe that the Tibetan fresco art has experienced a strong Central Asian influence since the end of the Xth century, and the downfall of Buddhism in Central Asia. Tibetan sculpture of the Xth and XIth centuries seems to have developed under the influence of the pāla art of Magadha. (Cf. Hackin: *Indian Art in Tibet and Central Asia, Influence of Indian Art*, India Society, 1925, p. 130).

Amdo, one of the northeastern provinces of Tibet has always been under the strong influence of Central Asian art. It is to Amdo that the Uighur Buddhist monks, and the remaining Hsi-hsia Tanguts fled after the sacking of their kingdom by Chingis-khan in 1227 A. D. Amdo is one of the most artistic provinces of modern Tibet.

the late Dr. A. H. Francke, the learned historian of Western Tibet and editor of Tibetan manuscript-fragments brought back from Turfan and preserved in Berlin. In his many books and articles dedicated to the kingdoms of Western Tibet, we find numerous allusions and descriptions of both pre-Buddhistic and Buddhist remains, which thus far had escaped the attention of the learned world.³

Shortly before the memorable date of 1914, Dr. A. H. Francke conducted on behalf of the *Archaeological Survey of India* an antiquarian survey of Indian Tibet, that is, the Tibetan-speaking countries of the Himälāyan borderland, situated within the frontiers of the British Empire. His survey covered the Sutlej Valley with the hill-state of Rāmpur Bashahr, Spiti, Rupshu and Ladāk. The results of his journey were embodied in two volumes, published by the *Archaeological Survey of India*, and entitled "Antiquities of Indian Tibet."⁴ The first volume contains the archaeological information gathered during his journey, and Volume II, edited by Dr. F. W. Thomas, the Tibetan text and English translation of the historical chronicles of Ladāk.⁵

Dr. A. H. Francke's volume is the first attempt of its kind to record all the available data about monasteries, both ruined and preserved, stūpas, stone sculptures, epigraphical monuments, and other pre-Buddhistic remains, thus preparing the ground for a thorough archaeological study of the region.

There is a sad lack of monographic studies of the great town monasteries of Tibet, which form such a characteristic landmark of the country, and which for centuries have been seats of its political and spiritual life. Some twenty years ago the noted German explorer, Dr. W. Filchner, gave us a description of the great monastery of Kumbum (sKu-bum byams-pa gliñ), in Northeastern Tibet,⁶ founded in 1583 A. D., although a temple had already been built there in 1577 A. D.

Dr. Filchner's book does not pretend to be an exhaustive monograph on the great monastery, and merely gives a modern picture of it; the rich monastery chronicles were left unexplored. For a long time this book remained the only representative of this kind of literature.⁷ In 1929, Mr. H. Lee Shuttleworth, M.A., published in "Memoirs" (*Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 39, Calcutta, 1929) a brief account of the famous Lha-luñ Temple in Spiti, which dates back to the time of Rin-chen bzän-po (956-1054 A. D.). The temple represents an interesting example of the XIth century art and is rich in ancient wood-carvings and sculpture, as well as inscriptions recording restorations of the temple undertaken at various times by West Tibetan kings. These XIth century temples, of which many are known to exist in Western Tibet, should be studied with the greatest attention, for in them we possess

3) A. H. Francke: "Kleine archiologische Errträge einer Missionarier nach Zangkar," ZDMG, 1906; "Archaeological Notes on Balumkhar," *Indian Antiquary*, 1905, and numerous other articles in the same periodical on West Tibetan rock inscriptions.

4) *Archaeological Survey of India*, New Imperial Series, Vol. XXXVIII, Part I, Calcutta, 1914.

5) *Archaeological Survey of India*, New Imperial Series, Vol. I, Part II, Calcutta, 1926.

6) Filchner: *Das Kloster Kumbum in Tibet*, Berlin, 1906.

7) The large town monasteries of Northeastern Tibet, Kumbum and Lahrang, are known to us from the works of the Russian explorers Tsybikov and Baradyin.

the material evidences of a period whose importance in the whole history of Buddhism in Tibet can hardly be overestimated. Most of these temples were erected with the help of Kashmiri artisans, and their sculptures and wall frescoes represent a precious record of Buddhist art in Northwestern India during the Xth and XIth centuries. Such monographic studies with detailed accounts of all the artistic treasures found in the monasteries and followed by a careful study of their written records and inscriptions, would, doubtlessly, substantiate the information given by ancient Tibetan records. Only archaeology can help us reconstruct the frame-work of the Tibetan past.

In the present article I intend to outline some of the immediate needs of Tibetan archaeology, as well as to enumerate the different fields open to research. Tibetan culture can be roughly classified as that of the valley, and that of the upland. The geographical environment has created these two distinct forms of Tibetan culture, and this division is marked throughout the history of the country. The present culture of Tibet is a composite phenomenon in which the nomads of the upland are culturally blended with the dwellers of the large monastic establishments and agricultural settlements in the valleys. What has been done for the districts of Western Tibet, remains to be accomplished in the provinces of Central and Eastern Tibet. Tibetan archaeological monuments can be roughly classified into two groups, each containing subsidiary members:

I. Archaeology of the pre-Buddhistic period—that is, the period preceding the introduction of Buddhism—and the first centuries of the Buddhist period, during which large tracts of the country were hardly influenced by the new doctrine, and continued to follow the precepts of their shamanistic faith or Bön. To this class of antiquarian remains belong all the megalithic monuments, stone graves, rock drawings, the ancient Bön-po altars or *lha-tho*, and similar monuments. All Bön-po monuments of a later origin mark a period of transition between the pre-Buddhistic and the Buddhist period, but for convenience can be classified with the first group of archaeological monuments.

II. Archaeology of the Buddhist period, that is, from the VIIIth century A. D. onward. This class is represented by numerous monuments, such as monasteries, temples or *lha-khañ*, *stūpas*, *māñi*-walls, stone-pillars and other epigraphical monuments, the sepulchres of ancient Tibetan kings in the Yalung Valley, and state and private palaces.

For convenience we shall examine each group of monuments separately:

I. *Archaeology of the Pre-Buddhistic Period*

A vast and well-nigh virgin field is open to scientific research. Monuments of the pre-Buddhistic period are found throughout the country, but are particularly frequent along the border and on the upland. Nomad districts are especially rich in pre-Buddhistic remains (Nag-tshañ, Nam-ru, Nag-chu-ka, Hor-sde or Nub-hor, and

the whole of the Grass Country of Northeastern Tibet). Megalithic monuments were discovered by the Roerich Central Asiatic Expedition in the region of the Great Lakes, north of the Trans-Himālayan Range. This class of monuments is represented by single menhirs, groups of three menhirs (these groups should be evidently taken as a separate class of Tibetan megaliths), cromlechs, and alinements.⁸ Tibetan megalithic monuments ought to be studied and surveyed. Many of these pre-Buddhistic sites are now declared to be Lamaist sanctuaries; the menhirs are said to be the abodes of the different divinities of the Lamaist pantheon.

Stone graves belonging to the period preceding the VIIIth century A. D. are found in groups in the province of Hor-sde, and in Nag-tshañ. No doubt they can be found in other districts of Northern Tibet. The Moravian missionaries have discovered interesting graves in the neighborhood of Leh in Ladāk.⁹ The finds consist of bronze and iron plaques, also bronze and iron arrow heads. The art of these nomad tribes was rich in "animal" motifs, and has a close affinity to the great nomad art of Central Asia.

An interesting problem is presented by the so-called *zi* beads which are frequently found in cultivated fields, and possibly originate from ancient graves which were accidentally unearthed during the ploughing of the fields. Modern Tibetans pay high prices for such beads, and a *zi* bead with seven "eyes" fetches a very high price on a Tibetan market. The bead is made of agate, and the technique of making it has been lost; in fact, modern Tibetans consider these beads to be a play of nature.

Bön-po sanctuaries are frequently found in the Western Hor region or Nub-hor, Northeastern Tibet, Western Tibet, and in the neighborhood of old Bön-po communities, such as the communities in Southern Tibet, south of the Tsang-po and along the Nepalese border.

Rock drawings have so far been discovered only in Western Tibet (Ladāk, Zang-skar, Lahul), but, no doubt, exist also in other parts of the country. I have seen similar rock drawings north of the Sanju Pass, a few miles outside of Tam-karaul, situated south of Sanju-bāzār.¹⁰ A good many of these rock drawings belong to the Buddhist period, especially those representing current Buddhist symbols, such as stūpas, and are accompanied by inscriptions. There can be no doubt that many of these rock drawings belong to the pre-Buddhistic period, and as Dr. A. H. Francke has shown, have a close connection with the Kesar Saga. We may add that some of them, representing in most cases hunting scenes and figures of the ibex, must have been related to the ancient shamanistic fire-worship of the Turkish-Mongolian tribes, and may belong to the same period as those of Southern Siberia, Mongolia and Rus-

8) For a description of the Tibetan megalithic monuments see G. de Roerich: *Trails to Inmost Asia*, Yale University Press 1931; G. de Roerich: *Animal Style Among the Nomad Tribes of Tibet*, *Siythika III*, *Feminarium Kondakovianum*, Prague, 1931.

9) Francke: *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Vol. I, pp. 71 ff.

10) For West Tibetan rock drawings see Dr. A. H. Francke: *Tibetische Hochzeitslieder*, 1923, pp. 70-71; Pl. I, II, III, Pl. I, 2, 3; Pl. VII, 8; Pl. VIII, 10; Pl. IX, 11; Pl. X, 12.

sian Turkestan. Doubtless many of the rock drawings representing the ibex are wayside offerings made by travellers in more recent times, this being another example of an ancient cult preserved to our day by the rigidity of tradition in Central Asia. Similar rock drawings abound in the Zarafshan Valley and other districts of Russian Turkestan.

A comparative study of the different motifs in the rock drawings discovered in Russian Turkestan, Southern Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet, would, we believe, reveal many interesting facts about this popular form of primitive worship in Central Asia. I am convinced that the fire cult of the Western Turks, described by the famous Chinese pilgrim, Hsüan-tsang,¹¹ represented this primitive form of shamanistic worship, and had nothing to do with Iranian influences, to which it is generally ascribed.

A separate group is formed by the so-called cave-dwellings, which are still used by the inhabitants of some districts of West Tibet and the southern Tsang Province. These cave-dwellings generally serve as living-quarters and store-houses for the winter. This is evidently a very ancient form of dwelling in Tibet, and should be studied. During my sojourn in Tibet, I found several old groups of these cave-dwellings in absolutely deserted districts, many miles away from any settlement or village. The primitive Bön-po worshippers used caves for their necromantic rites, and an exploration of these abandoned cave-dwellings may yield interesting results.

Bön-po monasteries, frequently found in Northeastern Tibet, the Hor region and Southwestern Tibet, properly belong to a separate group of monuments and mark a transition between the pre-Buddhistic and the Buddhistic periods. Many of them were built in Buddhist times, and evince a strong influence of Lamaist iconography.

II. Archaeology of the Buddhist Period

The numerous monuments of this group fall into several well-defined classes. The first includes the large town monasteries belonging to the later period of Buddhism in Tibet, such as Dre-pung (dPal-ldan 'Bras dpuñ, founded in 1416 A. D.), Sera (Ser-ra Theg-chen gliñ, founded in 1419 A. D.), Ganden ('Brog-ri dGa-ldan rnam-par rgyal-ba'i gliñ, founded in 1409 A. D.), and the other five ling of Lhasa; Tashilhun-po (bKra-çis lhun-po, founded in 1447 A. D.); Kumbum; Derge; Gön-chen (sDe-sge dGön-chen); Labrang (La-bran bkra-çis-dkyil, founded in 1709 A. D.); Sam-ye (bSam-yas, founded in 811 A. D., according to Sanang Setsen; another tradition mentions the date of 798 A. D.; the rGyal-rabs of the 5th Dalai Lama has the date of 766 A. D. The monastery used to possess one of the richest libraries with a large collection of Sanskrit manuscripts; the library was destroyed by fire and never reconstructed); Tho-ling (mTho-gliñ, founded about 1025 A. D.), and a number of larger monasteries in Ladāk, mentioned by Dr. A. H. Francke in his *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Volume I.

These monasteries own rich collections of paintings, both mural and on silk

11) Beal: *Life of Hsüan-tsang*, London, p. 43; Watters: *On Yuan-Chwang's Travels*, London, 1904, p. 81.

(*than-ka*); images embroidered in silk; bronze, wood, and clay images of different divinities; and well-furnished libraries of manuscripts and block-prints. Among the manuscripts are sometimes found Sanskrit manuscripts of the Xth-XIth centuries A. D. Often these libraries possess the original edicts of the Grand Lamas of Lhasa and Shigatse, which are extremely important and furnish dates and authentic data on the respective monasteries and regions. The temple records of these monasteries should be carefully studied, and whenever possible a photographic record of all the available artistic treasures obtained.

The second class is formed by smaller monasteries and temples or *lha-khan*. It is precisely in this group that we find some of the most interesting monuments of the Xth-XIth centuries. The Tsang Province, and especially the valley of the Nyang-chu, is rich in such monasteries and temples, and a careful study of them would reveal an extraordinary wealth of material. Some of these smaller monasteries, and even the lonely *lha-khan* or temples, contain rare libraries of early block-prints and interesting frescoes, some of which are dated and bear inscriptions of donations. Such temples are found all over Southern Tibet and are frequent along the western borderland of the country (the temples attributed to Rin-chen bzah-po's time in Ladak, Lahul, Spiti and the Sulej Valley). Very often a forlorn village will possess a remarkable temple or village shrine, full of interesting remains. Some of these villages have been important places in the past, and their temples are the only survivals of this period. An interesting group is formed by the cave temples, which are less frequent, but still numerous enough, along the Nepalese border. In most cases these represent hermitage chapels which were often abandoned after the passing away of the anchorite.

The next important group is that of the *stūpas*, *māṇi*-walls and other memorial monuments. *Stūpas* of the early Buddhist period (end of the VIIth to XIIth centuries A. D.) often contain valuable objects of art and manuscripts. Many of the river valleys of Southern Tibet, such as the Tsang-po, the Nyang-chu and the Yalung Valley with its sepulchres of ancient Tibetan kings, are rich in antiquarian remains of the early Buddhist period. Many of these *stūpas* are objects of worship and as such cannot be excavated, but the Government and some of the monasteries possess good and detailed inventories of all objects and manuscripts deposited in the *stūpas*. These lists or *dkar-čhag* form a numerous and important class in Tibetan literature, and contain descriptions of Tibetan places of pilgrimage, monasteries, temples, *stūpas* and large temple images, as well as of the contents of *stūpas* and other memorial monuments. The Sino-Tibetan wars of the last two decades have thrown quantities of such consecrated objects on the Chinese, Indian and European markets. *Māṇi*-walls are interesting for the inscriptions of donations which are often placed on them, and which frequently mention historical events.

Tibet is rich in epigraphical monuments. Besides the pillar inscriptions, such

as the famous pillar inscriptions of the Sino-Tibetan treaty of 822 A. D., which represents one of the earliest written records of Tibet, we know of a number of other inscriptions commemorating important historical events, installations of re-incarnate lamas, inscriptions recording the restoration of temples and alluding to historical events of importance, and numerous votive inscriptions left by rich donors and devotees. A *Corpus Inscriptionum* is greatly needed to embody all this vast working material, so invaluable to the historian. These inscriptions are generally found in monasteries and temples which were the centers of the political and religious life of the nation. Some inscriptions are even found on the road-side, carved on rocks and commemorating the deeds of some ancient king. Private palaces of the old Tibetan aristocracy, many of whom trace their families back to the ancient kings and tribal chiefs of Tibet, are real museums of old art objects. They often possess good private libraries of manuscripts of Tibetan religious texts, written in the old orthography. The study of these collections will considerably enrich our knowledge of Tibetan art.

When all this mass of material will have been properly analyzed and commented upon, we may hope to assemble the information scattered throughout the voluminous literature of Tibet. We are still very far from the day when detailed archaeological explorations will be possible in Tibet. Tibet has not broken away from its past, and jealously preserves its ancient records. Perhaps the day when archaeological investigations will be possible, will never come, but, on the other hand, every year brings in new material and new facts about the archaeological monuments of the Hidden Country, and we may hope for a better future in Tibetan studies. All this mass of material should be carefully collated with the written records of the country, and thus a firm ground prepared for further studies in the domains of Tibetan secular and ecclesiastic history.