

## General Introduction

### Précis

This book explores ancient markings on cliffs, caves and boulders as a device for relating the religious history of the highest reaches of the Tibetan Plateau. These manmade traces were carved and painted on natural stone surfaces at sites across the uppermost swathe of the Plateau, a cradle of Tibetan civilisation. The work is based on two major bodies of material evidence: rock art and rock inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> The inspection of rock art is focused on depictions of common architectural species distinguished by stratified forms (with the addition of circles and other geometric shapes). Together with rock inscriptions in the Tibetan language, this rock art constitutes a vital archaeological and historical record for appraising the changing face of religion on the uppermost part of the Plateau between ca. 100 BCE and 1400 CE. By probing the complexion of figures and letters in stone, this work enhances an appreciation of how early religious traditions contributed to the establishment of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon in Tibet.

Outside of the Indian cultural context, relatively little has been written about the historical antecedents of still existing religions in Tibet, not least because of the limited sources of data available. This monograph helps remedy the paucity of information for the study of the pre-1000 CE era by drawing upon the author's extensive fieldwork on the Tibetan Plateau. The findings of the monograph are based on a comprehensive survey of rock art and rock inscriptions conducted in upmost Tibet between 1995 and 2013. These key artistic and epigraphic resources have much to say about religious developments in the region before and after the invention of writing in Tibet in the seventh century CE. In graphic form, rock art documents beliefs and practices that predate the written word and, subsequently, rock inscriptions contributed to burgeoning literary activity on the Plateau. Also, in order to assess their cross-cultural characteristics and the intellectual and artistic debt owed to neighbouring territories, the stepped structures and epigraphy of Upper Tibet are compared to parallel bodies of physical evidence on other parts of the Tibetan Plateau as well as in Northern Pakistan.

The rock art catalogued in this study is comprised of the likenesses of stepped structures carved and painted in many different forms and styles, a tribute to the artistic imagination and spiritual comprehension of the ancient

inhabitants of highest Tibet. These simulacra of popular monuments tell us much about how religion evolved on the Western Tibetan Plateau in response to changing cultural, social, economic and political conditions over the course of the first thirteen or fourteen centuries of the Common Era.<sup>2</sup> From a time in which archaic cults held sway until the consolidation of the Buddhist faith, stepped structure rock art showcases religious milestones in the protohistoric and historical legacy of upmost Tibet and adjoining western regions of the Plateau. The allied body of evidence in the form of rock inscriptions considered in the book is distributed over the same geographical expanse as the facsimiles of stepped structures, as a cultural adaptation of the preliterate tradition of carving and painting rock surfaces. Beginning in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, inscriptions laid down in stone captured the utterances of individuals that participated in the remaking of the religious landscape in Upper Tibet. These epigraphs and those from Ladakh and Spiti are a candid source for understanding the religious trajectory of the Western Tibetan Plateau, richly supplementing textual accounts that retail the conversion to Buddhism. Complementing evidence from the rock art record, the corpus of inscriptions featured in this work recounts an epic tale of conflict and conviction, the consequences of which are still palpable in the Tibetan religious scene today.

For reasons of economy, the highest reaches of the Tibetan Plateau in the west are referred to in this work as 'Upper Tibet'. Upper Tibet denotes much of the western third of the Tibetan Plateau, minus the western fringe regions of Ladakh (La-dwags) and Spiti (Spi-ti) in India, Baltistan (Sbal-te) in Pakistan and the southern periphery of Dolpo (Dol-po), Mustang (Lo Smos-thang), etc. in Nepal. Upper Tibet consists of the interlinked geographic regions known in Tibetan parlance as the Byang-thang (Northern Plains) and Stod (Upper Regions). Upper Tibet now makes up the western half of the political entity called the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).<sup>3</sup> Covering some 650,000 km<sup>2</sup>, this territory is topographically defined by extensive tablelands, plains, broad valleys, lofty mountain ranges, canyons and numerous lake basins, which stretch north and west from Lhasa all the way to the modern borders of northern India and western Nepal. Upper Tibet is cut off from Central

<sup>1</sup> A draft of Part I of this book appeared on the author's website, *Tibet Archaeology* ([www.tibetarchaeology.com](http://www.tibetarchaeology.com)), from November 2017 until October 2019. A draft of Part II of this work was available on the same website from February 2018 until October 2019. The text of this book has undergone significant revision since it was posted online.

<sup>2</sup> The Western Tibetan Plateau is comprised of Transhimalayan regions north and west of Lhasa and the upper Tsangpo (Gtsang-po) river valley west of Sa-dga' in uppermost Tibet; southern and eastern Baltistan in Pakistan; Ladakh and Spiti in India; and Humla, Dolpo and Mustang in Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> Upper Tibet is divided among the 'Dam-gzhung, Nag-chu, Gzhis-ka-rtse and Mnga'-ris prefectures of the TAR, modern administrative structures that hardly reflect traditional Tibetan geographic arrangements.

Tibet by the Transhimalayan ranges (called Gnyanchen thang-lha and Gangs-dkar by modern geographers) but it also extends into the upper Brahmaputra valley (Mar-tshang gtsang-po), the badlands of Gu-ge opposite the Indian border states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and Spu-rang/Spu-hreng at the trijunction of Nepal, India and Tibet. Although Upper Tibet is extremely high in altitude (averaging around 4600 m in elevation) and very sparsely populated, it has supported advanced cultural activity, including sedentary patterns of settlement marked by major architectural monuments, for more than two millennia.

The rock art and inscriptions of Upper Tibet upon which this book is built are records of religious activities spanning the Protohistoric period (ca. 100 BCE to 600 CE), Early Historic period (ca. 600–1000 CE) and Vestigial period (ca. 1000–1400 CE). Tibetan literature and folklore aver that before the domination of Buddhism on the Plateau in the eighth and ninth centuries there were mytho-ritual traditions and a priestly class on the Plateau known collectively as *bon*. In extant Old Tibetan literature (ca. 700–1000 CE), the term *bon* does not designate a monolithic institution or creed but rather the ideological and performative aspects of rituals and the personnel who carried them out.<sup>4</sup> It is not known whether the word *bon* was originally used to label any of the archaic stepped structures depicted in rock art or actual examples built in Tibet. Ritual and mythic associations of these stepped structures with *bon* traditions, however, is likely. Tibetan historical materials describe early encounters between *bon* and Buddhism and between Buddhism and a successor to *bon* traditions, Yungdrung (G.yung-drung) Bon, a religion emerging in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. Like Tibetan Buddhism, Yungdrung Bon can be classed as a Lamaist religion.<sup>5</sup> Both Lamaist faiths share

<sup>4</sup> On the signification of the term *bon* in Old Tibetan texts, see Bellezza 2013a.

<sup>5</sup> For heuristic purposes, Tibetan culture and religion in this monograph are divided into two broad categories: ‘archaic’ and ‘Lamaist’. Lamaism is synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism and Yungdrung (Swastika) Bon, the two prevailing religions of Tibet, which appeared in a mature form with the rise of Classical Tibetan literature and a still familiar sectarian mosaic in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. Lamaism denotes the entire corpus of canonical, commentarial and other types of texts (magico-ritual texts, biographies, catalogues, technical manuals, collected works etc.) belonging to any of the sects of Tibetan Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon. The term Lamaism is applied to the practitioners, activities and physical assets of the two religions. Lamaism also refers to popular practices and oral traditions derived from or inspired by Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon doctrines, ethics and praxis. Furthermore, in this work Lamaism more loosely refers to cultural phenomena only peripherally or indirectly related to religious matters post-dating 1000 CE. Lamaist religions were a pivotal force in Tibetan communities, privileging the term’s inclusive application in a wider cultural nomenclature. As used here, ‘Lamaism’ has absolutely none of the negative or affective undertones that sully some (especially older) Western academic literature. The term ‘archaic’ in this work denotes religious traditions comprising the entire body of extinct, moribund and relict cult activities and ideologies, as preserved in Tibetan texts and in ethnographic and archaeological records. The diverse ethnographic textual and archaeological materials and processes constituting the archaic are not derived from Buddhism. The designation ‘archaic’ does not imply the erstwhile existence of a monolithic religion in either philosophical or institutional terms, nor does it specify a single period or place on the Tibetan Plateau. Rather it is a heterogeneous category that encompasses all cultural and religious phenomena

an Indian religious patrimony in common but they also drew heavily from pre-existing Tibetan customs and traditions. The wholehearted adoption of archaic cultural traits is celebrated in Yungdrung Bon; they remain central to its historical narrative, which holds that it is the ‘original’ religion of Tibet that long preceded the arrival of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> There are many Classical Tibetan texts (post-1000 CE) documenting various forms of religion thought to predate the introduction of Buddhism, but these are mostly structured along sectarian lines. Buddhist and Yungdrung texts exploit descriptions of early religion in Tibet to affirm contending loyalties and doctrines, not uncommonly idealising, distorting or even fabricating past events. Thus, these sources are not necessarily reliable indicators of the Tibetan religious environment before the rise of Lamaism.<sup>7</sup>

There are many kinds of petroglyphs and pictographs packed with representational and symbolic substance in Upper Tibet. These furnish a rich complement of information on the region’s cultural, social, religious, political, and economic make-up beginning in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1300–700 BCE). Yet, there is no class of rock art from the Protohistoric period onwards that better reveals the architectural and religious character of the region than stepped structures. As religious emblems, they are understood to have fulfilled ritual, ceremonial and other cultic functions. These likenesses of religious constructions are comprised of varying numbers of stacked rectangles and other geometric shapes, usually giving them the stepped profile from which their name in this work is derived. Stepped structures are composed of two major types of monuments: elementary shrines or tabernacles and their functional counterparts in Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon, known as *chorten* (*mchod-rten*) in Tibetan and *stupa* (*stūpa*) in Sanskrit. In conformance with established usage, the term *chorten* in this work is applied to *stupa* in the Tibetan cultural world (centred on the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan rimland), while the more widely known term *stupa* is applied to cognate Buddhist monuments in all other territories (tropical India, Northern Pakistan, Central Asia, South-east Asia, China etc.).

With the coming of Tibetan Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon, stepped structure rock art and rock inscriptions assumed religious identities readily recognisable today. Records of their times, Upper Tibetan epigraphs lay bare political and social elements of the contemporaneous

predating the introduction of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon. Some archaic phenomena survived the expansion of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon in unassimilated or partially assimilated forms. On this system of Tibetan religious and cultural classification, see also Bellezza 2020a, ‘Overview’; 2018.

<sup>6</sup> A great deal of non-Buddhist ritual and mythological material, some of it of an archaic character, is preserved in the first four of the nine bodies or vehicles (*theg-pa*) of Yungdrung Bon teachings. However, non-Buddhist and Buddhist materials are frequently entwined in the doctrinal system of Yungdrung Bon and deconstruction into neat cultural and historical categories is a challenging and not always achievable goal. On this subject, see Bellezza 2008a, pp. 201–08.

<sup>7</sup> On the use of Tibetan literary materials as interpretative tools in archaeological enquiry, see Bellezza 2020a; 2020b; 2018; 2017a; 2008.

religious environment in ways that texts do not. The editorial shortcomings of Classical Tibetan texts as chronicles of religion in prehistory and early history contrast with the franker disposition of stepped structures and rock inscriptions. Tibetan texts were frequently written by religious elites, those sufficiently literate and with the sociopolitical clout to undertake such work. Texts tend to be formal in tone and more constrained in content and are sometimes more self-conscious testaments than rock inscriptions, some of which were hastily made and have the sloppy or jumbled appearance of graffiti. From the royal edicts of kings inscribed on the famous stelae of Central Tibet to the scrawling of barely literate shepherds in Upper Tibet, matters of religion were frequently cast through a wider social lens in rock inscriptions than in the written word. In reference to Roman epigraphs, Booms (2016: 8) observes that inscribing on stone extended to all social classes, airing the concerns of kings, magistrates, commoners and slaves alike. Although the social structure of ancient Tibet was different from that of Rome, the making of rock inscriptions there also encompassed a broad range of society, conferring a voice upon subaltern groups as well.

### Methods and perspectives

The organisation and interpretation of Upper Tibetan rock art and rock inscriptions in this work is carried out using historical methods informed by ethnographic and archaeological perspectives. In Part I, the thrust of analysis is towards what Tibetans have written about elementary stepped shrines and *chorten* as a means of reconstructing religious progress within the wider Tibetan cultural world. In Part II, the vast literary tradition of Tibet informs an examination of the subject matter, rhetorical content and grammatical structure of rock inscriptions. The literary and epigraphic traditions of Tibet furnish a point of reference absent from bodies of rock art created by preliterate and non-literate cultures. As material cultural resources, rock art and rock inscriptions are amenable to archaeological methods of investigation that quantitate their physical qualities (dimensions, form, age, spatial configuration etc.). Archaeological enquiry also supplements a qualitative analysis of the abstract qualities (ideological, mythic, symbolic etc.) of rock art and rock inscriptions based on written records. Ethnographic sources are employed in this book as an adjunct to the understanding of the significance of rock art and rock inscriptions acquired through historical and archaeological methods.

As with other rock art of protohistoric antiquity, the function and meaning of carved and painted archaic stepped structures in the rock art of Upper Tibet, Ladakh and other regions of the Tibetan Plateau can only be known imperfectly. Fundamental questions concerning their identity, applications and chronology will perforce linger on. There is also uncertainty regarding the social, political and economic conditions in which the production of elementary stepped structures in Upper Tibet and other places on the Plateau took place. Questions regarding the

wider cultural ambit before the time of the Tibetan empire (beginning ca. 600 CE) must be considered in conjunction with other kinds of artistic, archaeological and textual data germane to the Protohistoric period.

Universalist approaches to grappling with rock art through disciplines such as phenomenology, cognitive sciences, neuropsychology and neurophysiology have gained ground among some specialists in recent decades. Nonetheless, they are eschewed in this work because of their highly abstract disposition, mechanistic determinism and non-specific geographical and cultural applicability.<sup>8</sup> One universalist angle has it that the myth and ritual portrayed in rock art are related to the broad category of world religious experience called ‘shamanism’. Whatever its merits, any such single model imposed on rock art worldwide involves much reductionism.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Tibet, there is little value in holding that elementary stepped structures represent a shamanistic tradition of worldwide proportions when various types of *bon* priests (*lha-bon*, *gshen-bon*, *dur-bon*, *dbal-bon* etc.) are documented in Tibetan literature as being active in prehistoric and early historic times. Although some ancient sacerdotal figures are likely to have gone into trance, a practice still well attested in the Tibetan cultural world today,<sup>10</sup> Tibetan texts avouch that *bon* priests were involved in a variety of devotional, ritualistic and didactic endeavours, and in statecraft too. These religious personnel and their equipage can hardly be pigeonholed merely as shamans and shamanism.

Pertaining to the pre-seventh-century CE milieu, a central conundrum revolves around how the carvings and paintings of elementary stepped structures in the rock art of the Tibetan Plateau correspond with religious lore purporting to describe prehistoric rituals and beliefs in Tibetan texts. Through a critical probing of the genesis and transmission of Tibetan texts it may be possible to distinguish pedestrian versions of the past from more imaginary ones. However, the discernment of a firm documentary foundation for narratives describing the lineaments of prehistory is difficult to sustain for any given text. A survey of references to prehistoric shrines

<sup>8</sup> Universalist approaches purport to discern the perceptual and cognitive states of the creators of ancient rock art. However, the conclusions drawn by these studies cannot be propounded in the same manner as those involving more tangible phenomena that can be objectified through measurement, classification and comparison. While the hermeneutic theories spawned by universalist approaches may provide insight into the mindset and sensory environment of ancient artists, these lack historical and cultural specificity and run the risk of obscuring the religious, sociopolitical and economic compulsions that motivated individuals to produce rock art in particular times and locations. For a study championing universalist approaches to the analysis of rock art, see Dobrez 2016 (which also includes comments appended to the article by other researchers both supporting and challenging his assumptions). For a powerful polemic against universalist approaches to the interpretation of rock art, see Bahn 2012.

<sup>9</sup> In restricted cultural and regional contexts, shamanistic interpretation may be a useful tool in understanding the meaning and function of rock art. For example, a key protagonist of shamanistic theory, Lewis-Williams, demonstrates how shamanism could be applicable to San rock art found in southern Africa (Lewis-Williams 2006).

<sup>10</sup> On Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums and their links to *bon* priests, see Bellezza 2015k; 2005.

and tabernacles in Tibetan literature indicates that they are mostly visionary and mythic in tone, not prosaic records of the distant past. Nevertheless, certain sources do appear to preserve authentic cultural memories of ancient times, including historical fragments relevant to an understanding of the use of built stepped structures and their rock art facsimiles (see chapter two for details). Wherever Tibetan texts reveal chronicled information about the distant past, this content is more accurately framed as incorporating historical or quasi-historical attestations, rather than as purely ahistorical in make-up.

Of particular importance to this study are Yungdrung Bon sources, with their emphasis on the prehistory of Tibet. Nonetheless, the degree to which Yungdrung Bon lore is actually germane to the pre-seventh-century religious scene on the Tibetan Plateau remains difficult to gauge. While there are certainly parallels in the archaeological, rock art and textual records detectable in the multilayered geometry, ritualistic functions, non-Buddhist sacerdotal agency and localisation of stepped structures in Upper Tibet, these affinities do little to corroborate the historical veracity of specific personalities and events mentioned in Yungdrung Bon narratives. This is not to insinuate that the sages, priests and kings and the happenings centred around them are entirely fictional, but that the fixing of historical coordinates is unachievable from the text-internal evidence alone. The potential historicity of elements of the legends, hagiographies and quasi-historical testimonies presented in Tibetan texts must be viewed against collateral art and archaeological evidence. That is the only means by which the dominant pseudo-historical view of prehistory afforded by Tibetan literature might acquire more solidity in cultural-historical analysis.

In addition to comparing the location, orientation and typology of ancient stepped structures on the Tibetan Plateau with indications provided in Yungdrung Bon literature, greater insight into the cultural status of stepped shrine rock art is gained by an examination of their chronological and spatial relationship to other classes of rock art. Stepped structures on the Tibetan Plateau and in Northern Pakistan occur with other well-rehearsed genres of rock art in the Protohistoric period, including wild animal and human portraiture, the hunting of large wild ungulates with the bow and arrow, and symbolic subjects such as the swastika and sunburst. These genres of rock art are mostly comprised of conventional portrayals of significant cultural enterprises complete with their conceptual substructure. The presence of combat and other martial rock art presupposes a warlike element in the ancient societies of the Western Tibetan Plateau and Northern Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> Anthropomorphic portraiture exhibiting a variety of different costumes and headgear on the same and proximate rock panels as stepped structures belonging to the Protohistoric period provides a window onto the complex social arrangements that these architectural

depictions were part of in various cultures. Moreover, so-called Eurasian Animal Style rock art (as well as portable metallic objects), showing creatures rendered on an arcuate schema and ornamented with curvilinear motifs, charts interregional links between the Western Tibetan Plateau, Northern Pakistan and other territories in Inner Asia, expanding still farther the sphere of cultural interactivity in both the Iron Age and Protohistoric period.<sup>12</sup>

Rock art on the Western Tibetan Plateau is mainly located in hunting grounds, on major travel routes and as part of sanctuaries and sacred geographic features. Thus, petroglyphs and pictographs of stepped structures are either directly or indirectly associated with a variety of cultural, social and economic activities, including food procurement, trade and religious observance. In Far Western Tibet and Ladakh,<sup>13</sup> many rock art sites are situated near ancient agricultural settlements and residential and ceremonial installations (including fortresses and necropolises). These spatial relationships betoken interactive aspects of ancient social, political and economic life in those territories.<sup>14</sup> In other words, stepped shrine rock art is but one element of an integrated cultural output. My findings also indicate that stepped shrine rock art in Upper Tibet is coeval with the production of a rich assemblage of portable objects (e.g. ceramics, copper-alloy and wooden vessels, bronze ornaments, iron implements, wool and silk textiles and wooden articles, etc.). The intertwining of elementary stepped shrine rock art with other facets of material culture also defines Eastern Tibet, Spiti, Ladakh and Northern Pakistan. By placing early stepped shrine rock art in more inclusive cultural contexts, it can be shown that it was a manifestation of advanced ideological and technological processes of various peoples spread out over an area extending from the Hindu Kush to the eastern reaches of the Tibetan Plateau in the Protohistoric period.

Despite well-delineated religious associations, stepped structures of all kinds in the rock art of the Western Tibetan Plateau warranted little attention in pre-modern times and they are still largely ignored by local residents. Belonging to a moribund artisanal tradition like other rock art, stepped structures are sometimes accredited to the artistry of the dualistic *lha-'dre* spirits or are seen as self-formed (*rang-'byung*) creations (Bellezza 2002a: 135, 136). Stepped structures belonging to archaic religious systems in Tibet were marginalised or entirely forgotten because they do not enjoy a clear-cut place in the Lamaist devotional and ritual scheme. Traditionally, even Yungdrung Bon savants took little interest in the scribblings on stone. A similar state of affairs is encountered in the Tarahumara country

<sup>11</sup> On combat and martialism in rock art in these territories, see Bellezza 2020a, ch. 9.

<sup>12</sup> On Eurasian Animal Style rock art, see Bellezza 2020b; 2014h.

<sup>13</sup> Far Western Tibet consists of the relatively low valley systems (3200–4500 m) of Sgar, Ru-thog, Gu-ge and Spu-rang in Mnga'-ris prefecture of the TAR. Ladakh sits on the western extremity of the Tibetan Plateau, immediately west of Far Western Tibet. It forms a union territory administered by the Central Government of India.

<sup>14</sup> Understanding the social, political and economic underpinnings of Upper Tibet in the Late Prehistoric era through its material culture has been the focus of much of my research efforts. See, for example, Bellezza 2020a; 2020b; 2014a; 2014b, 2014c; 2008a.

of the Sierra Madre Occidental in Chihuahua, Mexico. Although the sites where pictographs occur have much symbolic significance for the Tarahumara, they are often avoided, the rock art they contain being attributed to the other and a nebulous past acknowledged for its relations with good and evil spirits (Wyndham 2011: 388, 390, 399–403).

The analogous forms of early stepped structures and *chorten* rock art strongly suggest that the former are the historical precursors of the latter. However, this is no assurance that the concepts and functions attached to the production and use of rudimentary stepped structures in Tibetan rock art, those which originated in non-Buddhist religious traditions predating the Early Historic period, resembled Lamaist concepts and functions. Rather, a variable set of motivating factors should be considered for the paintings and carvings of more primitive stepped structures on the Plateau, which were aligned with the archaic religious traditions prevailing at that time. Although the time spread is not as great, a somewhat comparable situation is met with in ancient China in reference to Confucian memorial tablets known as *bei* (which appeared in the first century CE) and Buddhist stelae of the Northern and Southern dynasties (386–589 CE). While the forms and functions of the two kinds of Chinese decorated and inscribed pillars are similar, there are sizable differences in their signification (Wong 2004: 2). Transformation in the ritual and conceptual groundwork underlying long-lasting analogous forms is also seen in the pre-Buddhist (second to first century BCE) and Buddhist (third to seventh century CE) burial urns at Pyu sites in Burma (Stargardt 2005). As with the stepped structures, these aforementioned objects belonging to differing cultural regimes exemplify the principle of ‘similar form, disparate meaning’ typifying religious change in the transition to Buddhist forms of faith. In other words, the forces shaping ideological innovation cannot be adjudged through physical forms alone.

The making of rudimentary stepped structures and *chorten* rock art on the Western Tibetan Plateau converged in the Early Historic period, a time of accelerated social, political and economic progress. The introduction of the Buddhist *chorten* from abroad added a cosmopolitan stamp to the religious fabric of Upper Tibet, Ladakh and Spiti. It is well known that in Tibetan Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon *chorten* are created as a means for gaining merit (*bsod-nams*), for modelling and worshipping the enlightenment being (Sangs-rgyas) and for enshrining relics (*gdung dang ring-bsrel*).<sup>15</sup> These well-engrained beliefs and practices stem from Indian Buddhist tradition and help to explain the production of *chorten* rock art in Tibet as a functional corollary to the fashioning of architectural, sculpted and painted versions of the monuments. Nevertheless, non-Buddhist sects on the Western Tibetan Plateau that adopted the *chorten* in the Early Historic period grafted

antecedent design traits onto this religious paradigm to augment its tangible and conceptual purview well beyond the bequest received from India. As in Northern Pakistan, the arrival of the *chorten* and rock inscriptions in Ladakh predates the Early Historic Period, suggesting that the Buddhist assimilation of stepped structures began there earlier. Stepped structures in the form of the *chorten* came to overshadow more primitive examples. In the Tibetan world, the former acted as a model for otherworldly beings while the latter was relegated to serving as a receptacle for mundane spirits. The assignment of new functions to older architectural forms is legion in the monuments of all major world religions. A case in point is the Indian *stupa*, which owes its origins to a class of pre-Buddhist burial tumuli (see chapter one). Also noteworthy is the vaulted rectangular hall open on one side of West Asian origins known as the *iwan*, which evolved from a pre-Islamic sanctuary and cosmological space to an architectural component of mosques and madrasahs (Peker 1993).

A cross-cultural perspective helpful in understanding the rise of Lamaist *chorten* in rock art is furnished by the appearance of Buddhist water spirit (*nāga*) statues in India, ca. the second century BCE (although this type of spirit long predates the advent of Buddhism). The creation of these statues is explained using two major but not mutually exclusive models: the conversion model (which stresses the doctrinal reformulation of pre-existing spirits) and the localisation model (which stresses the incorporation of pre-existing spirits into the Buddhist landscape as a means to legitimise the spread of the religion into new areas) (Shaw 2013: 94–96). In a general sense, both of these models are suited to the Tibetan rock art record, in that carved and painted *chorten* herald the rise of Buddhism and its eventual absorption of earlier religious traditions, as well as registering the occupation of new territories by Buddhist practitioners that resulted in the displacement or absorption of adherents of non-Buddhist religious traditions. As discussed by Shaw (*ibid.*, 96, 97), the conversion and localisation models do not address the economic and political forces that recast art and objects during the diffusion of Buddhism in India. Although still difficult to discern in the sparse archeological record of Upper Tibet, economic and political exigencies were critical agents in the institution of Buddhism there too. However, the myth, piety and idealism of Tibetan religious histories almost always outweighs acknowledgement of economic and political causal factors. It is well known that during the rise of the Tibetan empire in the early seventh century CE and its expansion across the entire Plateau by the late seventh century CE, a puissant economic and political order was forged, which came to rely increasingly on Buddhism as an integrating and legitimising force. The economic and political appendages of the empire, coloured by religious choices being made at that time, set the stage for the espousal of the *chorten* as the chief non-residential monument in Tibet. This had the effect of consigning archaic burial, ritual and ceremonial monuments on the Plateau to utter obscurity. The *chorten* as the pre-eminent religious symbol of the Tibetan world continues still today.

<sup>15</sup> On the functional and symbolic relationship between relics and *chorten*, see Martin 1994.

It is the *chorten* that accompanies certain rock inscriptions in Upper Tibet, serving as the thematic interface to the two halves of this monograph. These allied devotional expressions in stone date to ca. 700–1400 CE and represent intertwined dedicatory and votive functions in Tibetan religions. Such picture–text ensembles document the transition to literacy in Upper Tibet from the inception of writing in the seventh century CE until the great flowering of Tibetan literary culture some four or five centuries later. Like *chorten*, writing in Tibet is seen as intrinsically possessed of sacred qualities and its execution in spreading religious ideals and practices is viewed as a highly meritorious act. Inscriptions and texts that embody Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon teachings are thought of as concrete expressions of the enlightenment being. As Almogi and Wangchuk (2016: 13) remark, ‘The belief was that [sacred] texts in general – and even smaller parts of them, down to individual letters and words – possess special powers.’

Rock art and rock inscriptions acted as instruments of public advertisement and visual capture in Upper Tibet. In conjoined forms they embody the synergy of preliterate and literate forms of religion. The appeal of the figurative together with the appeal of the written proved to be of lasting importance in Tibet, with a broad spectrum of epigraphic and artistic traditions continuing to the present day. Scherrer-Schaub (2013: 140) observes that, in Tibet, inscriptions were designed to inform the public, particularly when made by ‘public authorities’. This is no less true of Upper Tibet: rock inscriptions were devised as communication tools for broadcasting specific kinds of information to a wide audience of viewers. However, much of this information is not didactic in nature but encoded as sociopolitical subtexts in mantras and prayers. Moreover, while some rock inscriptions were made by local leaders and religious luminaries in Upper Tibet, most of them appear to have been the handiwork of ordinary herders, monastics and pilgrims. Picture–text ensembles comprised of stepped structures and inscriptions set down on rock surfaces were a powerful tool for the refashioning of religion in Ladakh and Northern Pakistan. The engraving of stepped structures with inscriptions in those territories predates the same custom in Upper Tibet by as much as six or seven centuries. Dating to what is referred to in this study as the Protohistoric period, the *stupa/chorten* with inscriptions in Indic and Iranian languages in Northern Pakistan and Ladakh was emulated on the rest of the Plateau with the acquisition of Tibetan literacy. The merging of pictorial and written information in an integral form would prove persistent on the Tibetan Plateau, setting a precedent for modes of popular communications (including cultural instruction, religious transmission and political affirmation) that would endure for many centuries.

Concerning the Imperial period (ca. 600–850 CE), the famous Tibetan author and visionary O-rgyan gling-pa (b. 1323) cites the ‘four portals of virtuous royal practices’: guarding royal tombs, residing in castles, establishing temples and raising stelae with edicts (*brtsis kyi rdo-ring*)

(Scherrer-Schaub 2013: 142, 143), elevating the practice of inscribing stone surfaces to the most edifying of elite undertakings. When seen in this light, the creation of rock inscriptions was a natural outgrowth of those cultural activities held in highest esteem during the Imperial period. Like Tibetan rock inscriptions, the composing of Tibetan manuscripts was thought of as a peerless accomplishment, one that also diffused widely in the Early Historic period. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, newer methods of cutting images and words into stone and wood came to dominate in Tibet. In that period, the dissemination of religious, cultural and political information through rock inscriptions drifted to those produced as relief carvings. In the textual domain, xylography greatly proliferated in Tibet after ca. 1400 CE, substantially multiplying the bulk of literature available on the Plateau (cf. Almogi and Wangchuk 2016: 7, 8; Snellgrove and Richardson 1968: 139, 160). Although causal relations cannot easily be postulated, the spread of woodblock printing coincided with the decline of rock art and the older methods of crafting rock inscriptions in Tibet.<sup>16</sup>

The bulk of rock inscriptions in Upper Tibet are religious in character and mostly comprised of mantras (words and syllables repeated multiple times for ritual, meditational and devotional aims). Some rock inscriptions consist of Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon prayers. All other types of rock inscriptions in Upper Tibet (autographs, ordinances, memorials etc.) are far less common. Even in the vast realm of Roman inscriptions, the majority of epigraphs belong to a fairly small group of categories: funerary; founding of private and public monuments; dedications to rulers, individuals and deities; and many public documents (Booms 2016: 9). Moreover, most Roman inscriptions are formulaic (*ibid.*, 6), as in the display of just a few cardinal mantras in the rock inscriptions of Upper Tibet. The largest single class of inscriptions in the Roman world are funerary in nature, functioning as memorials for the dead (*ibid.*, 7). On the other hand, memorial inscriptions are very rare in Upper Tibet.

In recent years, the study of inscriptions has expanded its traditional remit of collection, decipherment, dating and classification to consider epigraphs as a form of material culture. In doing so, inscriptions are not treated as isolated texts, each with a self-contained meaning expressed through its grammar and syntax, but become a kind of object. By their classification as physical entities, inscriptions are endowed with a materiality that supplements or alters their literary import. Like other types of artefacts, when rock inscriptions are approached visually and tactilely their significance to those who made and viewed them can be appraised more fully. In this regard, the opening observations of Eastmond (2015) in a volume about ancient and medieval inscriptions in Eurasia are appropriate to Tibet as well. In this collection

<sup>16</sup> On the spread of major Buddhist works in Tibet through the use of xylography, see Sernesi 2016. This author simply states that xylography had become a common technology in Tibet by the sixteenth century (*ibid.*, 268).

of articles, the authors are unanimous in their approach to inscriptions, holding that they are not disembodied words that can be studied in isolation, but texts whose physical qualities are just as essential in determining their significance (Eastmond 2015: 2). That is to say, the manner in which words were presented to onlookers was a crucial ingredient in their conveyance of information. Therefore, inscriptions can be seen as both texts and monuments. As monuments too, inscriptions communicate more fully to their intended audience than do texts. Epigraphs of all kinds (royal proclamations, prayers, historical accounts, name lists etc.) speak not just through words but by non-verbal aspects such as the choice of script, location, spatial organisation, letter style and clarity, from which much of their meaning is derived (cf. Cooper 2008: 1–3, 7). Writing on Roman inscriptions but relevant to this study too, Booms (2016: 6) notes that while books were the province of those prosperous enough to be trained to read, inscriptions were conspicuous and public in nature, thereby informing a wider range of society, including those less visible in the literary annals. In Upper Tibet, even those without the knowledge or wherewithal to avail themselves of texts could participate in the messages and signals transmitted by the physicality of rock inscriptions. As has been recognised, the level of literacy affects how much is gained from reading the inscribed words and how much from the context and staging (Eastmond 2015: 5).

The siting and spatial organisation of rock inscriptions in Upper Tibet was mostly dictated by pre-existing rock art. This is especially true of rock art sites surrounding the largest lake in the region, Gnam-mtsho, where two thirds of all rock inscriptions in Upper Tibet inventoried in this work are located. The rock inscriptions of Gnam-mtsho are painted in ochre and other pigments and compete for space with many pictographs. These pigment applications are situated in dozens of small caves arrayed around the lake. Caves were chosen for the occurrence of a smooth mineral veneer that covers their walls, an ideal surface for laying down epigraphs and pictographs. There is a very limited number of smooth-walled surfaces to paint and inscribe on at Gnam-mtsho, leading to the crowding and superimposition of images and inscriptions. Competition for space between inscriptions and pictographs is not the only spatial dynamic observed at Gnam-mtsho. Of much importance to understanding their historical and cultural significance is the placement of rock inscriptions relative to one another. As will be demonstrated in this study, the arrangement of rock inscriptions at Gnam-mtsho is a barometer of religious loyalties and tensions. Rock inscriptions at this lake are often superimposed on one another, erased or otherwise tampered with, the result of sectarian rivalries between Buddhist and non-Buddhist factions. Hence, the statement by Scherrer-Schaub (2013: 140, 141) that rock inscriptions are a permanent record that cannot be modified or shortened must be qualified to fit the evidence in Upper Tibet.

Although rock inscriptions are the most indelible form of writing at Gnam-mtsho, they served as contingent

texts, open to revision by those with contending religious identities. Legibility was deliberately employed to promote or impede the reading of inscriptions. As Eastmond (2015: 3, 4) holds, the visual qualities of inscriptions can either facilitate or obfuscate readings, thereby altering their meaning and facilitating various interactions with readers. The superimposition and modification of painted rock inscriptions at Gnam-mtsho apprised readers as to the changing ownership and sectarian status of rock art sites from as early as the ninth or tenth century CE until the demise of the tradition of making painted inscriptions, ca. 1400 CE (see chapter nine). During that time span, rock inscriptions were employed to manipulate and appeal to the sentiments of readers, signal the changing fortunes of religious groups, and announce the eventual triumph of Buddhism as the paramount religious force at Gnam-mtsho and in other regions of Upper Tibet too.

The choice of scripts, calligraphic styles, inscribing implements and materials, the care lavished on writing, and various personal flourishes are all facets of what might be called the aesthetics of writing. The aesthetics of writing have much to tell us about shifting sectarian power dynamics at Gnam-mtsho and other places in Upper Tibet. Thus, it is possible to speak of Buddhist and non-Buddhist pigments, calligraphies and modes of presentation that reinforced religious affiliations and social identities. Calligraphy in general acquired much importance in Tibet not only as an artistic expression but also as a symbolic apparatus, serving as a conspicuous marker of religious loyalty and content. Indian epigraphic scripts first exhibit a tendency towards calligraphic ornamentation in the first century CE, developing further in the ensuing centuries (Richardson 1985: 3). However, calligraphy in ancient India never attained the same prominence it enjoyed in ancient China, Iran or Tibet.

As Iwao *et al.* (2009: viii) maintain, the current state of Tibetan epigraphic study is not very advanced as compared to Greek and Latin epigraphy.<sup>17</sup> A survey of the scholarly literature on Tibetan epigraphy bears out this observation. Although much of the academic work conducted to date is of a high standard and contributes significantly to the study of Tibetan inscriptions, the field is still in the process of formulating a methodological and theoretical framework. Methods of recording and presenting inscriptions elaborated upon by Bruun and Edmondson (2015), which includes a description of provenance, physical appraisal of surfaces and inscriptions, line drawings, squeezes and photos, are more selectively adhered to in Tibetological work. For example, while the present study describes the

<sup>17</sup> In the West, the ancient Greek historian Theopompus was the first to view inscriptions critically, using public epigraphy to demonstrate the imperialistic tendencies of the Athenians (Cooper 2008: 7, 8). From the time of Confucius, the Chinese sought out inscriptions as an instrument of historical research and corroboration, which gained much momentum in the time of the Song dynasty. For a review of the long and august history of epigraphic studies in China, see Sevillano-López 2018. In the Tibetan tradition, a pioneer epigrapher was the adept Ka'-thog rig-'dzin tshé-dbang (1698–1755 CE), who made copies of Old Tibetan inscriptions (Iwao *et al.* 2009: vi; Scherrer-Schaub 2013: 139, 140).

provenance of rock inscriptions and furnishes photos of them, it omits the use of drawings and squeezes. Inclusion of these methods in this work was not feasible due to time and resource constraints. Moreover, painted rock inscriptions do not lend themselves to producing squeezes. Scherrer-Schaub (2013: 139) calls for conformance to the precedents set down in the classical tradition of epigraphy. Although this is a noble goal in terms of methodological rigour, it is not particularly attainable in the area of notation. For example, the use of subscribed diacritic marks in Sanskritised Tibetan and superscribed letters and vowel markers render impractical commonly employed sigla in Greek and Roman epigraphy. Other peculiar features of the standard Wylie system of transliteration employed in this monograph, such as the combination of two Roman consonants to render a single Tibetan consonant and the use of the ‘small *a*’ that is prefixed, suffixed and subscribed to letters to designate long vowels, form diphthongs and indicate nasalisation, etc. also complicate any attempt at emulating classical epigraphic conventions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On basic rules of Tibetan pronunciation and orthography, see Naga and Virtanen 1999.