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Laurianne Bruneau

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In between Kashmir and Xinjiang: Buddhist remains of the Nubra region. Results of the Franco-Indian Archaeological Mission in Ladakh.

by Laurianne Bruneau

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Abstract

The introduction of Buddhism into Ladakh is traditionally associated with Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055). This famous translator is one of the main characters of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism into Tibet that initiated in the kingdom of Guge and of which he was native.

In Ladakh, the ruins of Nyarma are traditionally held to be the oldest Buddhist remains because the temple is mentioned in Rinchen Zangpo's biography as one of his foundations as well as in the royal Chronicles (*La-dvags rgyal-rabs*). However, archaeologists and art historians assume that numerous *stūpa* engravings and Buddhist stone sculptures seen throughout Ladakh predate these written sources and therefore the Second Diffusion.

Such remains were documented within the frame of the Franco-Indian Archaeological Mission in Ladakh (in French: Mission Archéologique Franco-Indienne au Ladakh, hence MAFIL). Created in 2012, the MAFIL is a cooperation project between the Archaeological Survey of India and the [East Asian Civilisations Research Centre](#) in Paris, funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supported by the French Institute in India.

The mission focused on the Nubra, the northernmost area of Ladakh region. Its role as a gateway between the northwest of the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, especially the Tarim basin, is well known for modern times.

Preliminary surveys, conducted in the 1990's and 2000's, revealed a variety of remains ranging from Prehistory to the Medieval period. Three additional campaigns by the MAFIL (2013, 2014 and 2015) enabled to better apprehend the role of the Nubra for the diffusion of Buddhism. An inventory of Buddhist remains from the Nubra along with a comparative analysis and proposed dating was presented.

A large ruined *stūpa* was archaeologically and geophysically surveyed at Tirisa. Morphologically it is reminiscent of monuments of Kashmir and Central Asia attributed to the last quarter of the 1st millennium AD, thus enabling a preliminary dating. Remains of other buildings were noticed in vicinity. Two wooden samples submitted for AMS analysis confirmed our dating hypothesis based on architectural observations: the *stūpa* of Tirisa dates from the mid-8th century-9th century (calibrated dates: 764-894, probability 86,1%) and was possibly standing as early as the 5th-6th centuries (calibrated dates: 425-579, probability 95,4%). These dates make it, so far, the earliest known Buddhist site in Ladakh and the Western Himalayas.

Tibetan rock inscriptions, engraved next to *stūpa* images, found in proximity of the ruins testify to the long existence of the Buddhist site of Tirisa, at least until the 13th century AD.

Other early Buddhist remains in the Nubra consist of a dozen of rock sculptures, sometimes monumental (more than 4m in height). Their iconographic and stylistic features are typical of Western Himalayan Buddhist art. The latter span a long period of time, from the 8th century with the Gilgit bronzes, to clay sculptures and paintings of the late 11th - early 12th century found in the temples of Alchi for example. A comparative analysis for a selection of pieces was made in order to propose a dating. We also addressed the possible function(s) of the steles and relieves in considering their archaeological setting.

Being one of the main gateways to the oases of the Tarim basin, Buddhist remains documented in the Nubra testify to the importance of the Western Himalayas for the diffusion of Buddhism from its Indian homeland to Central Asia, or possibly directly from Central Asia to the Western Himalayas. The discoveries made in the frame of the MAFIL also reveal the importance of archaeology to reconsider the religious history of the area.

More information on MAFIL activities are available at:
www.mafil.org and <https://www.facebook.com/mafil.org/>
Full fieldwork reports are available online for download.

Legends



View of the ruined *stupa* of Tirisa,
looking north



View of the monumental stone sculpture of
Digar Kharpoche

Dr. Laurianne Bruneau
Founder and co-director of MAFIL
Associate Professor, Central & Indian Studies
History & Philology Department
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), Paris.
e-mail: laurianne.bruneau@ephe.sorbonne.fr

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