
Amne Machin: A Closer Look

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Northern Tibet is one of the last areas on the planet still to be properly explored by the mountaineer. It holds 7000m peaks which have yet to be reached, let alone properly surveyed or climbed. By contrast, Amne Machin was known to the West in Victorian times. The reasons for its early notoriety were threefold. Firstly it is a holy mountain, the home of a God: Ma-chen, an earth lord, controls the lightning, hail and merciless elements of nature. Until the communist takeover thousands of pilgrims made the circuit of the range each year. Secondly, it is not, by Tibetan standards, a remote mountain. It lies at the NE extremity of the Tibetan Plateau, in a bend of the Yellow River, less than 300km from China. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is the home of the Goloks.

Until finally suppressed by the Chinese in the '60s, the Goloks were the most feared tribesmen in Tibet. They paid allegiance neither to Lhasa nor to Peking, robbing and killing with a fine lack of discrimination as to their victims. The only sins in the Golok book were cowardice on the field of battle, submission to outside authority and disloyalty to the clan. 'Golok' in Tibetan is said to mean 'head backward' or 'rebel'. The Goloks ensured that no one got near enough to Amne Machin to verify any of the strange claims which surfaced as western explorers started to nibble at the edges of their homeland.

In 1922 General George Pereira saw Amne Machin from a distance of 160km and was impressed enough to think that it might prove higher than Everest.¹ He passed this information to Joseph Rock, a prolific explorer of W China, who, in 1926, made a brave sortie towards the mountain from the Yellow River, despite death threats personally delivered by the Chief of the Butshang Goloks. From a distance of 80km he could make out the individual peaks: 'I shouted for joy as I beheld the majestic peaks of one of the grandest mountain ranges of all Asia. . . . I came to the conclusion that the Amnyi Machen towers more than 28,000 feet.'² By 1956, having seen the glories of Minya Konka and Everest, he had had second thoughts and 'could not help but come to the conclusion that the Am-nye Ma-Chhen is not much more than 21,000 feet'. Rather too late a vision of the truth to get in the way of a good story.³

In all the fuss about height, everybody overlooked Rock's clear and accurate description of the main peaks:

' . . . the Am-nye Ma-Chhen Range has three prominent peaks; the southern pyramid (second highest) is called Spyan-ras-gzigs (Chenrezig), the Avalokitesvara, of which the Dalai Lama is believed to be an incarnation; the central lower peak, a smaller pyramid, Am-nye Ma-Chhen; and the northern, which is the

highest, a huge, round, broad dome called dGra-hdul-rlung-shog (Dra-dul-lung-shog) "Victor of enemies wind wing". R A Stein thinks that . . . wind wing is the name of a horse . . . The dome in the north is the highest part, but is not so imposing as the large pyramid at the southern end.⁷

There is more information for the climber in that paragraph than in any book yet published.

The story of a peak higher than Everest was strengthened during the Second World War, when American pilots, flying at 29,000ft 'over the hump' between India and China, reported seeing a peak higher than themselves. In 1949 Leonard Clark, an American Intelligence Officer, penetrated the Golok heartland with a large armed party sponsored by the warlord Ma Pu Fang. As the result of a rough survey he calculated the height of Amne Machi to be 29,661ft. It is difficult to know when fact ends and fiction begins in his highly readable account.⁴ In 1960 the Chinese reported that they had climbed Amne Machin and that a survey had revealed it to be 7160m (23,491ft).⁵ The legend of Amne Machin had finally been laid to rest . . . or had it?

In 1980 the Chinese opened a number of peaks in Tibet to foreign climbers for the first time. Among these was Amne Machin, and it was revealed that a new survey had found, as observed by Rock in 1926, that the highest point was the northern peak (Amne Machin I), and not the southern peak (Amne Machin II) climbed by the Peking Geological Institute in 1960.⁶ The bad news was that the height of the mountain had dropped to 6282m (20,610ft). Mike Banks, who in 1980 was the first foreign climber to see the peaks close-up, provided much-needed independent confirmation.⁷

From then onwards things happened very fast. In 1981 the Joetsu Mountaineering Association were the first of three teams to attempt the first ascent. They chose the Harlon II Glacier as their line of attack and, after having been avalanched from below the low col at the head of the glacier, they laid over 300m of fixed rope up one of the grotty gullies leading to the crest of the spur separating the N and S bays. They continued up a steep hanging snow arête to the easier final slopes of Pt 5977. On 22 May, Watanabe, Yamamoto and Miyake set off from Camp 2 at 5700m and reached the highest point of Amne Machin I after a long climb up to and along the main ridge. The summit of Amne Machin I itself was found to be an extensive flat snowfield.⁸

On 2 June an Austro-German team under the leadership of Sigi Hupfauer arrived at Base Camp and started on the Japanese route, but was held up by bad weather. Meanwhile a very fit Galen Rowell, Harold Knutson and Kim Schmitz arrived and, with very little time available, took a much more direct route up the sharp E ridge of the NE summit (6154m). The Americans reached the summit on 9 June after three days of climbing, to be followed the next day by Hupfauer, Gaschbauer, Lammerhofer, Schmatz and Vogler.^{9,10,11} Rowell implies in his accounts that the Japanese did not reach the highest point, quoting in particular the lack of prints or other evidence on the summit. However, the Japanese and German accounts leave no doubt that they did succeed.



25. *Amne Machin I (Dradullungshog) from the E. Pt 5977 at far left, Pt 5827 at right.*



26. *The E face of Amne Machin I (Dradullungshog), NE summit.*

available to visiting climbers. The accompanying plan should help to dispel some of the confusion. Amne Machin I sends four separate spurs eastwards from its N-S ridgeline. Thus the ridge running E from Pt 6154, the NE summit (the American route climbed by Rowell's party), has variously been described as the E, the NE and the NNE ridge. The least confusing convention seems to be to call this the E ridge of the NE summit, and the long continuation of the main ridgeline, over Pts 5991 and 5827, the NE ridge.

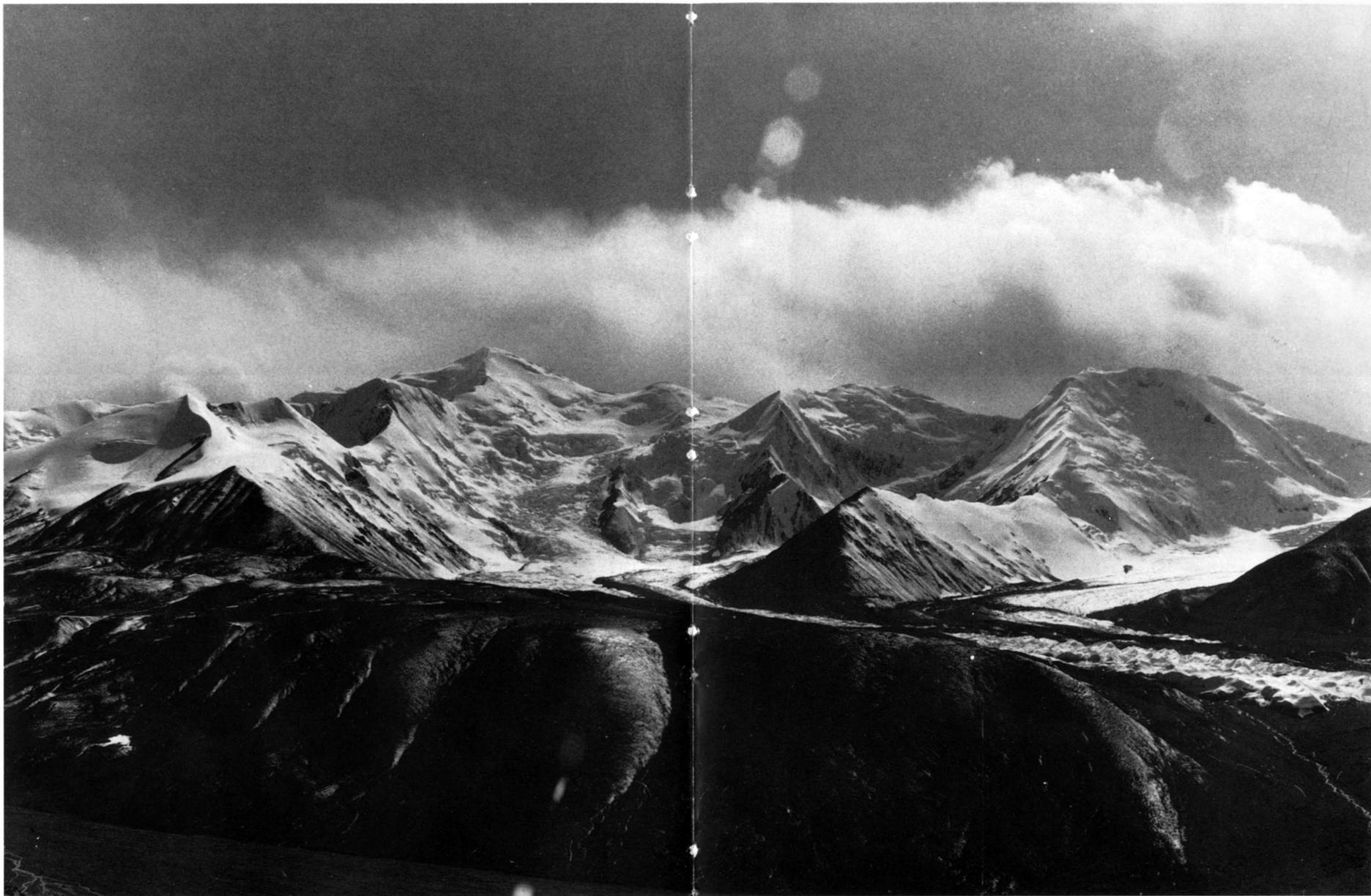
At the beginning of 1988, Amne Machin I, II, IV and IX have been climbed. Amne Machin III, the peak actually named after the God, remains unclimbed. The exact peaks constituting Amne Machin V to VIII remain unclear, but no one appears to have climbed on the great snow plateau or the northern part of the main ridge beyond Pts 5991 and 5827, nor on any of the peaks between Amne Machin II and IX at the southern end of the massif.

The range seemed ripe for a British visit in 1987, despite our being six years behind everybody else. After the initial surge in 1981-82 expeditions to China from this country had dried up, Everest excluded. Cost was obviously a major factor and, on the basis of initial advice, it looked as if we might be in for a tough time. In fact a number of pleasant surprises were in store, for myself and my companions Martin Hampar and Mike and Cathy Pettipher. The pound is now worth 180% of what it was in yuan terms in 1982, and the rates in Chinghai are somewhat more reasonable than in Tibet. Add to that the relative accessibility of Amne Machin (two days drive, one day walk-in) and the fact that transport is probably the most expensive element of any CMA bill, and a trip to this area is probably less expensive than to many parts of the Karakoram.

Nevertheless, we were both relieved and grateful when the Wogen Group, metals and mineral traders with a special interest in China, agreed to provide a major part of the funds required, plus the resources of their Beijing office. The latter came mainly in the guise of Ben Williams, their Beijing representative, whose caving experience seemed to qualify him at least as well as any of us for what was to come, and who was therefore quickly incorporated into the team. Ben's command of Chinese and long experience of Chinese ways ensured a trouble-free progression to Base Camp, though I sometimes missed the cut-and-thrust of East meeting West.

Lying at the NE extremity of the Tibetan Plateau, Amne Machin is most easily reached via plane to Lanzhou and steam train on to Xining. Here we were met by our friendly and efficient hosts, the Chinghai Mountaineering Association, and introduced to our Liaison Officer, Mr Gao, and the drivers of our two 4WD landcruisers, Messrs Sun and Li.

As we ventured out towards the mountains, it became apparent that the problematic inaccessibility of Amne Machin has had its back broken for ever by the Chinese. Good roads lead to within a day's walk of the heart of the massif. The journey is still an impressive one. The pagodas of the Sun-Moon Pass, the historical border between Tibet and China, lead you up on to the plateau and on through the large town of Gonghe to a great plain 80km across, with sparse pasture, sand dunes and the odd camel. Another pass leads into bandit country - rough, tough highlands with the isolated ruins of fortified compounds still beleaguered amidst a sea of black tents. Fort Ta Ho Pa, refuge to Clark and



27. *Amne Machin II, IV and III, L to R, above the Harlon glaciers.*

many others, seemed to have met a similar fate. By evening we had climbed to Wen Chuan where, at 4300m, the height gain for the day rose to 1800m. Without the benefit of Ben and Martin's Diamox, Mick and Cathy spent a rough night. The second day took us on to the Hua Xi Shia, with its improbable juxtaposition of satellite dish and prayer flags, and off on to the Szechuan road.

Snaking over a green rise, Amne Machin's virgin western flank came suddenly into view. As we rolled to a halt, one of the mountain's guardians strode forward and the aggressive arrogance of our first Golok was unmistakable. Mick lined up his camera only to see our friend stick out his tongue and swiftly pull a knife. The speed of Mick's withdrawal was matched only by his subject's amusement at the effect of this little joke.

Then it was turn left again, over the 4760m Majixue Pass towards Da Wu and the heart of the Golok Autonomous Region – chilly, even at the start of September. Then left yet again, on a road unmarked on the maps, which runs over into the headwaters of the stream draining the southern flank of the range, and then down a picturesque gorge to Snow Mountain Commune. Round one corner we surprised two pilgrims, boards strapped to their knees and hands, prostrating themselves full-length on the ground. In several months, body-length by body-length, they would accomplish their circuit of the mountain.

Snow Mountain Commune (Shie Shan Shang) is a surprisingly squalid community where the novelty of visiting foreigners has obviously worn off. It was nice to be off the next morning with our nine horses and two Golok drivers. The latter stayed strictly on horseback, while we and the Chinese played mule men. We followed the pilgrim route NW up the river draining the NE flank of the mountain, eventually crossing it on horseback. Where the pilgrims branched off towards the north, we continued with the main river valley as it gradually bent round to the south and the glaciers of Amne Machin I became intimidatingly visible. After 24km and 600m of ascent, there was only some perilous boulder-hopping over a side stream dropping from the NE face before we were home and dry, in a grassy hollow about a mile below the snout of the Harlon Glaciers at 4300m.

Our initial objective was the Japanese route on Amne Machin I and on 8 September we set up camp at 4800m at the top end of the N moraine of the Harlon II Glacier. We were to spend eight days at this beautiful site, reached by a delightful walk up the moraine valley which was marred only by rubbish left by the Japanese in 1981. Mick and Cathy were still suffering badly from the altitude and remained at Base Camp, where there was some compensation in the flowers and the sight of a wildcat.

The Chinese had recommended the right-hand bay of the Harlon Glacier, which they said had been climbed by the Canadians in 1986. This consisted of a series of three icefalls. It took Martin and me five exhausting hours to get through the first of these and to ascertain that it merged straight into the second. Rather than continue to bang our heads against this particular series of brick walls, we moved to the left-hand bay and the Japanese route. On a day when strong gusts were occasionally inverting our North Star dome, Martin stayed behind as ballast while Ben and I set out for the Japanese Gully up the right-hand side of the bay. To our dismay, what had seemed a simple route across a

small crevassed area turned into another nightmare maze. Six hours later we emerged in a thunderstorm, and, to avoid having to find our tracks down under new snow, we took to the rocks of the spur. This was our first introduction to Amne Machin slate, where attempts to kick away loose holds result eventually in one's own personal overhang.

Things were not going too well, and the lure of unclimbed and relatively straightforward Amne Machin III was too strong to resist. On 15 September we crossed the glacier before dawn and scrambled up loose but easy ground on the side of the level lower section of the E ridge. As the sun hit us, the rock ran out and we continued up perfect 45 snow, lying to a depth of about a foot over hard ice. By late morning, we reached the crest of the ridge, at just under 5200m, where Martin elected to drop out. Ben and I continued along the ridge to the point where it takes off for the summit, preceded by a short rocky section and gap. By then I too was running out of steam, and it was obvious that we would not make the remaining 600 or 700m that day. Ben was still going strong, but it looked as if the next section would be rather more demanding technically.

We returned to pick up Martin and, rather than descend the softening snow, traversed on the tottering S side of the ridge, before running down a virgin scree gully to the Harlon I Glacier below. Our visit to this new area was spoiled by a snow-storm, but we navigated our way round the end of the ridge and off the ice on to an idyllic pasture isolated between the two Harlon Glaciers. Here lay a deep aquamarine lake, with small stone men perched on the boulders and a single blue poppy cased in ice. The weather cleared abruptly and we tramped back across Harlon II, up the moraine and home to bed.

After a day's rest we descended to Base Camp and Ben and Mick, who by now was fully fit, set off to climb Sor-ra ('Sickle', 5452m), one of the two minor peaks at the end of the long NE ridge of Amne Machin II. On their way, Amne Machin IX (5690m), the prominent southern outlier of the range, came into view. This is the peak visible from Snow Mountain Commune, and it looked attractive enough for them to change their minds and walk an extra 6km to set up a camp at 4800m on the N ridge. That night brought a fall of fresh snow, but they set out anyway, following the N Glacier towards the col to the west of the peak. A spectacular avalanche from Amne Machin II failed to deter them, but in mid-afternoon black clouds rolled in at speed and turned them back with snow and high winds. After an hour the storm departed as quickly as it had arrived, but the damage had been done.

Next morning, 20 September, our last day before the yaks arrived, Ben and Mick set out again. This time they reached the col without incident and, after some steep snow climbing, they became the first people to stand on the summit of Amne Machin IX. The day was not without incident as they left the radio aerial behind in the tent, so ensuring an interesting day for those left glued to the transmitter or the monocular.

That was it, bar the six-day journey home. We had not made much of an impression on the higher peaks, but the range had given up a number of its secrets. While the two main peaks have been climbed, there are still plenty of virgin summits to tempt the visitor. Even more interesting are the classic lines still to be attempted. Though the area will probably not yield routes of extreme

difficulty, its scale and complexity should not be underestimated. The traverse of the main peaks, the NE ridge of Amne Machin II from Sor-ra and the entire 30km of the W side of the range remain obvious and unanswered challenges. Amne Machin's golden age has yet to come.

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