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Exploration in Baltistan

In Baltistan (fig. 1) even less archaeological monuments are known than in the other districts of the Northern Areas of Pakistan, i.e., Gilgit and Diamir (Jettmar 1977, 1980–81, 1985; Jettmar & Thewalt 1987; Thewalt 1985). The reason is that Baltistan is situated just in the gap between the zone crossed by Sir Aurel Stein during his great expeditions to Innermost Asia or visited as late as in 1942 (Stein 1944: 16–24), and which was studied



Fig. 1 – Map of Baltistan. The former principalities are indicated by underlining (e.g., Shigar). The ruler of Skardu was considered as *primus inter pares*. Buddhist rock-carvings and inscriptions are known from Shigar, along the Shyok river (Keres, Khapalu), in the Basin of Skardu, esp. at the confluence of Indus and Shyok, in Kharmang (not accessible as too near to the 'Line of Control' between Pakistan and India), finally in the easternmost part of Rondu. Reliefs are known south of Skardu (Manthal, and at the entrance of the Shigar valley). Rock-paintings occur in Astor, a dependency of Skardu during the last centuries.

by A.H. Francke with less erudition but with great zeal and many assistants recruited from Buddhists converted to Christianity. The members of the De Filippi Expedition (1913/1914) were among those few who included Baltistan into their field of research (Biasutti & Dainelli 1925; Dainelli 1925). But their interests concentrated on the splendid wooden mosques and an already famous group of Buddhist monuments at Manthal on the old road to Satpara (Duncan 1906: 297–307).

The most comprehensive compilation of the political and religious history of Baltistan is found in the *Short History of Jammu and Kashmir* written by Hashmatullah Khan (1939: 482–675). He was a high official in the service of the Maharaja, posted many years in the mountain provinces of the state. Apart from genealogies and chronicles of the dynasties which administered Baltistan up to 1842, his text is based on local traditions, sometimes of remote villages. As top administrator, Hashmatullah Khan had excellent conditions for his research: at a wave of him the best informants were at his disposal. The attentive reader of his work will get the impression that the statelets of the area had grown up from the 'grassroots'.

The late Professor Emerson, an American scholar who had had contact with one of the last traditionally-minded rulers, put forward a variant of this concept in a posthumous article (1984: 101–5). Emerson assumed that 'stateless Tibetans' were organized and ruled by military adventurers who got their legitimation by the protection which they provided to the peaceful agricultural communities.

The local scholar Hashmatullah Khan and the American sociologist Emerson took the local traditions at their face value, as solid arguments that during the pre-Islamic period which ended in the 14th century AD, Baltistan was a mosaic of independent villages, founded and settled by immigrants who had come late enough to remember their origins. Many of them were supposedly refugees from the north, either via the Hispar glacier (from Hunza or Nager), or from Khotan after crossing the Mustagh pass, or even descending the Hushé or Saltoro valleys. In any case that meant difficult crossings of the main Karakorum range across passes between 5000 to 6000 m (Vohra 1987: 268–71).

In most cases, however, the immigrants came from the west, from Gilgit and Brushal. Chilas is also mentioned. People living there were called Dards (a term apparently not exclusively taken from European sources: cf. Clarke 1977; Jettmar 1982).

Settlers from the east, from Ladakh, partly from Nubra valley following the Shyok river, are also reported, but surprisingly seldom. From Kashmir came individuals, rather than communities.

So far, nobody was worried about the evident discrepancy between these oral traditions and what we know from Chinese sources of the 1st millennium AD referring to the same area.

According to Chinese reports Baltistan must have been the basis of the most prominent power in the Western Himalayas, a state called Bolor (Chavannes 1903: 149–54; Pelliot 1959: 91 f. prefers Balōr or Balūr). The titles of the rulers reveal that they emulated a standard set up by the Kuṣāṇa emperors. The administration, too, was organized according to the same model, Sanskrit was used as official idiom (Chakravarti 1953–54: 229–31). The basis must have been a dense sedentary population. We have reasons to assume that the areas west of Baltistan called Bru-ža (Laufer 1908: 3; later on we hear of a district with the name Prūṣava) were incorporated and accordingly called ‘Little Bolor’. We must further conclude that the dynasty had an army strong enough for such conquests.

The contradiction between this political situation and the popular traditions describing most of the valleys as unoccupied and without cultivation, could be explained by the hypothesis that the conquest of the Tibetans in the first half of the 8th century AD – known from Chinese and Tibetan texts – immediately caused the exile of the dynasty, clearly told by the Chinese pilgrim Hwei-ch’ao (Fuchs 1939: 444), but was followed by the expulsion of substantial parts of the original inhabitants. At least we should reckon with a time of foreign inroads and destructions. A Chinese army invaded Great Bolor in 753 AD (Chavannes 1903: *notes additionnelles* p. 88n). There are arguments for a vacuum filled by immigrants with a clearly different cultural background. The *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, a geographical work written in Persian, describes ‘Bolorian Tibet’ as a land where ‘the people are chiefly merchants and live in tents or felt-huts’ (Minorsky 1970: 93).

Investigations in 1984 and 1985 have provided us with substantial proofs that in earlier times Baltistan was really part or centre of a Buddhist state. Dr Adam Nayyar, Scientific Director in the National Institute of Folk Heritage, invited our counterpart Director Mr M.S. Qamar and me to join his team for a short exploratory trip. On the last day of this collaboration, Dr Nayyar received an alarming information from Mr Abbas Kasmi, a renowned expert in Balti culture: rock-carvings, perhaps inscriptions, had been seen in Shigar, very near to the former castle of the ruler. In the same evening the team started for Shigar – and found the hint to be true. So after a couple of weeks, the Pak-German Study Group came back to a place where a brook is pouring out of a narrow gorge, the main canals for the whole oasis are branching off here. On a steep cliff, towering the palace, was the ruler’s refuge in case of a sudden assault – a castle provided with

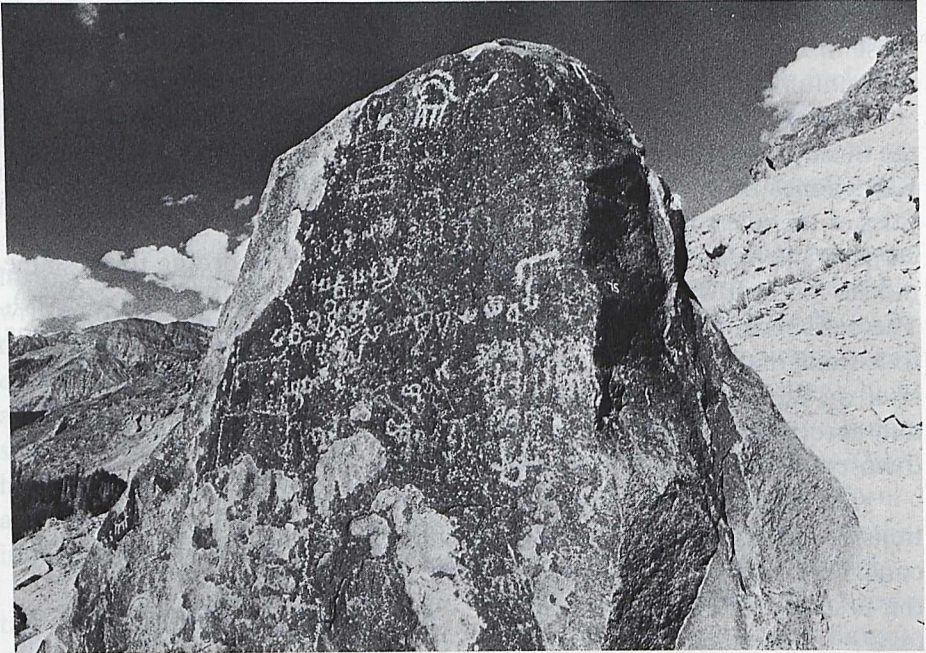


Fig. 2 – Rock with Buddhist inscriptions on the steep path to the terrace of Shigar with the Buddhist ruins and petroglyphs, maybe marking the access to the holy precinct. Brāhmī inscriptions, carvings of *stūpas*, (later) animal carvings. (Photo Thewalt).

a water-tank. The peasantry in the neighbourhood had the cumbersome task to keep the basin always filled.

On the other side of the brook, between the steep and rocky slope of the mountain and the fertile land at the flat bottom of the main Shigar valley strewn with hamlets, there is a barren, sandy terrace. Only some rocks, apparently fallen down from the mountain slope, are to be seen from below. Using one of the trails crossing the very steep slope we climbed up for approximately 100 m and saw the first petroglyphs. Only a little farther, on the tops of hillocks overlooking the plateau at different levels, there were ruins, heaps of stones, some with a low enclosing wall, circular in shape – certainly *stūpas*. In a depression between the hillocks and the slope of the mountains there had been a large building – we were tempted to explain it as a Buddhist monastery. A staircase leads up the slope between the boulders. More ruins and inscriptions were discovered at a still higher level, when Mr Kauper, the land surveyor of our group climbed up (figs. 2–7).

Only one of the Brāhmī inscriptions which we saw in this precinct, certainly the longest and best preserved one, was so far deciphered by Pro-

fessor von Hinüber on the basis of colour photographs. It was written on behalf of the lord of a district most likely identical with Shigar, and testifies him as a pious Buddhist. (Maybe his son had lived under the tutorial of the monks, and the inscription reminds the solemn return to the father). Palaeography indicates an early date: 7th or even 6th century AD. Thus the complex must belong to the time of the Bolorian Kingdom. A well-preserved bruising of a *stūpa* on a large boulder near the mountain slope, and another one in a narrow slit between two rocks belong to a type which I did not find represented in the Indus valley near Chilas. Characteristic is the high spire with many discs. Similar *stūpas*, however, supported by lotus flowers like that on the large boulder, flanking a jewelled and crowned Buddha, also on a lotus-seat, are to be seen on a so-called Kashmir bronze now in the Rockefeller Collection (Pal 1975: 106, no. 30). The Sanskrit inscription on the base mentions the donators and a date. This bronze is certainly related to another one which has a dedicating inscription mentioning one of the Paṭola-Śāhis ruling in Bolor, Nandi Vikramāditya (Pal 1975: 108, no. 31).

In one of my articles I already mentioned that according to a conjecture expressed by some of my friends in Gilgit, such bronzes were found in the 'hollow *stūpa*' at Naupur, Gilgit, and went directly into the collections of

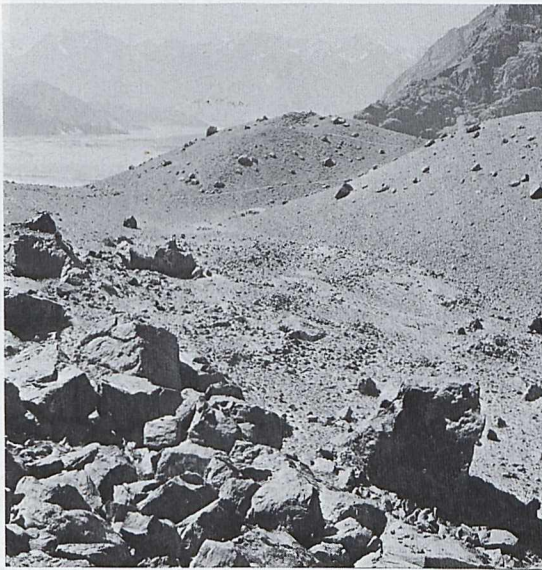


Fig. 3 – View to the north over the barren plateau of Shigar; in the background the bottom of the valley visible; the hillock in front of it is crowned by the ruin of one of the *stūpas*. (Photo Thewalt).



Fig. 4 – View from the slope of the mountain over the terrace with the Buddhist monuments, in the background fields and farmsteads. Two *stūpas* are situated at the left end of the ridge, the two others are topping segments of the ridge. In the depression, the ruins of walls belonging to a large building are to be recognized. (Photo Kauper).



Fig. 5 – The ruins of a *stūpa* topping the northernmost segment of the ridge are well preserved. (Photo Jettmar).

the Maharaja of Kashmir, while the other items, especially the manuscripts, were delivered to the museum in Srinagar (Jettmar 1981: 12–14).

In any case, all these objects – the Gilgit Manuscripts as well – have the same cultural background, they represent the Buddhist and pre-Tibetan period of Baltistan up to the middle of the 8th century AD.

There are more cultural remains belonging to the same period. Dr Nayyar took photographs of inscriptions on rocks near the beautiful lake of Katsura, today surrounded by the buildings of a tourist resort called ‘Shangri-La’. One of these inscriptions tells of the visit of a monk to a ‘new monastery’ – according to a forthcoming article by von Hinüber.

Not far from the radio station at Skardu, many clay tablets with Buddhist texts and/or relevant images belonging to a class of objects called *ts’a ts’a* were found (cf. Tucci 1932; Taddei 1970; Fussman 1972). Most of them were taken away by locals to be presented as gifts to foreigners or left to the children as toys, but some were handed over to Mr Qamar who collected them for the Department of Archaeology and Museums. On the basis of my photographs they were deciphered and dated by Fussman



Fig. 6 – *Stūpa* resting on a lotus blossom. Bruising on one of the boulders situated just below the mountain slope. (Photo Jettmar).

to the centuries of the Bolorian kingdom. In one case only he suspected a later date, 9th century AD. Maybe clay tablets had been deposited in a *stūpa*, but if so, the monument was so thoroughly demolished by treasure hunters that only a hole in the ground is to be seen on the spot. Petroglyphs depicting elaborate *stūpas* with a long spire and many disc-like umbrellas (mentioned before) are not typical for Baltistan – maybe they render monuments erected in Kashmir.

More frequent is another model: the basis of the *stūpa* is shaped like a sort of stepped pyramid. *Aṅḍa* and spire are reduced in size or suggested by a few lines only. The term ‘terraced *stūpa*’ used for this kind seems to be convenient. I saw such images near Gol at the confluence of Indus and Shyok, and on the way to Khapalu on the right bank of the Shyok river. In both cases Brāhmī inscriptions (apparently of an early type), evidently related to the images, are to be seen on the same boulder. So we may assume that they were made before the 8th century AD, still in the time of the Bolorian state (figs. 8, 9).

The Tibetans seem to have taken over just this type as a starting point for the subsequent evolution which led to what Aurel Stein called ‘cruciform type of *stūpas*’. He observed one of them on a rock flanking the way to the Darkot pass. The translation of the Tibetan inscription was furnished by A.H. Francke. He informed Stein that this ‘cross-type’ occurs frequently in Ladakh (Stein 1928: 45–47, 1050–51, fig. 46).

One of the *stūpa*-carvings observed on a boulder at the plateau of Shigar does not represent the fully developed ‘cruciform type’: it could belong to a transitional group. The inscription which will be published by Professor Sagaster was made by a Buddhist monk who used Tibetan language and script (fig. 7).

The main question is whether the monastery was still ‘working’ or already in ruins when this Tibetan monk appeared on the scene. Maybe a small Buddhist community re-established the veneration of still existing *stūpas* in a time when the locals had fallen back into local cults. Carvings of a rather primitive type are visible even inside the holy precinct, animals, men on horseback, hunting and fighting scenes.

In an area still on the same plateau, but separated by a gap in the slopes from the Buddhist sanctuary, are only such carvings. There I did not see a single inscription nor any *stūpa*-carvings at all.

Maybe, even during the first Bolorian stage of Buddhist activities, there existed ceremonial centres for the fertility cults and hunting magic of the villagers in the oasis of Shigar as they still exist in so many countries under the roof of dominant Buddhism. When Buddhism lost official support, such



Fig. 7 — Boulder on the edge of the terrace near Shigar with Tibetan inscription and carving of a *stūpa* which belongs to a type also known from Ladakh. Later additions are a 'cruciform *stūpa*', animals; a hunting scene. (Photo Thewalt).

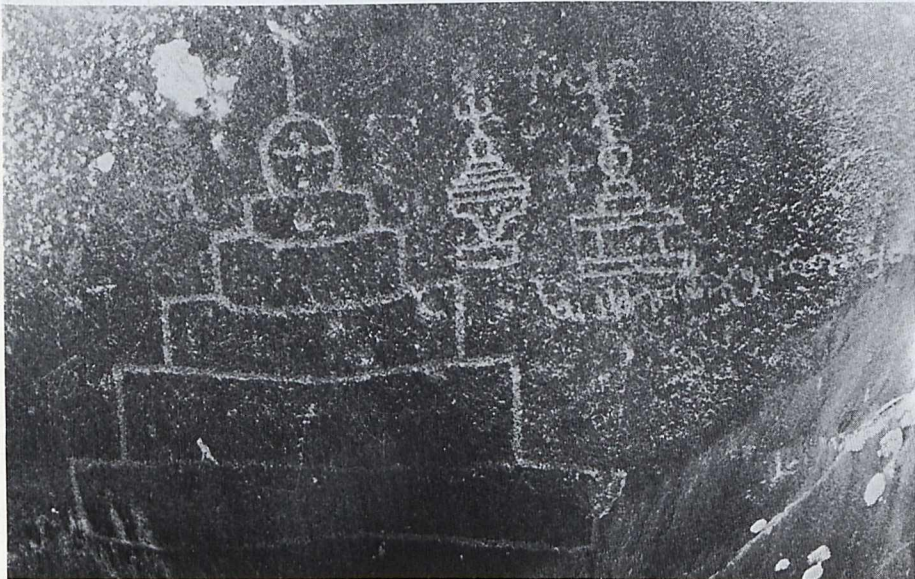


Fig. 8 — Carving of a terraced *stūpa* seen near Gol, near the confluence of Indus and Shyok. In 1955 explained to the author as image of the superimposed heavens. Brāhmī inscription. The two 'cruciform *stūpas*' are later additions. (Photo Jettmar).

local cults got a new change, and the bruising and graffiti could expand, invading even the formerly Buddhist precinct.

Later on, there certainly was a Buddhist recovery: in the time when the restoration of Buddhist faith in Tibet took place, after the arrival of the great Indian teacher Atiṣa in AD 1042. But in this time not rock-carvings but reliefs were the preferred medium of religious expression, as to be seen on the famous rock of Manthal near the old route to Satpara. Another, so far unknown, badly damaged but still impressive relief was observed near the old pony-track to Shigar. The photograph made by Prof. H. Hauptmann is published here for the first time (fig. 10).

The number of such monuments remains very small, they were hardly augmented during the following period in spite of the fact that the conversion to Islam did not take place before the 15th century.

There are two lines of research which must be followed up in the next time:

- 1) We know of more carvings and inscriptions in other parts of



Fig. 9 – Carvings of two 'terraced *stūpas*' with unusual decoration and 'vase of plenty'. *Stūpa*-like monuments of a type known from the Chilas area were added in a later period. A part of the Brāhmī inscription gives a Sanskrit text, the rest is enigmatic (in Tibetan?). Rock on the right bank of the Shyok on the way to Khapalu. (Photo Jettmar).

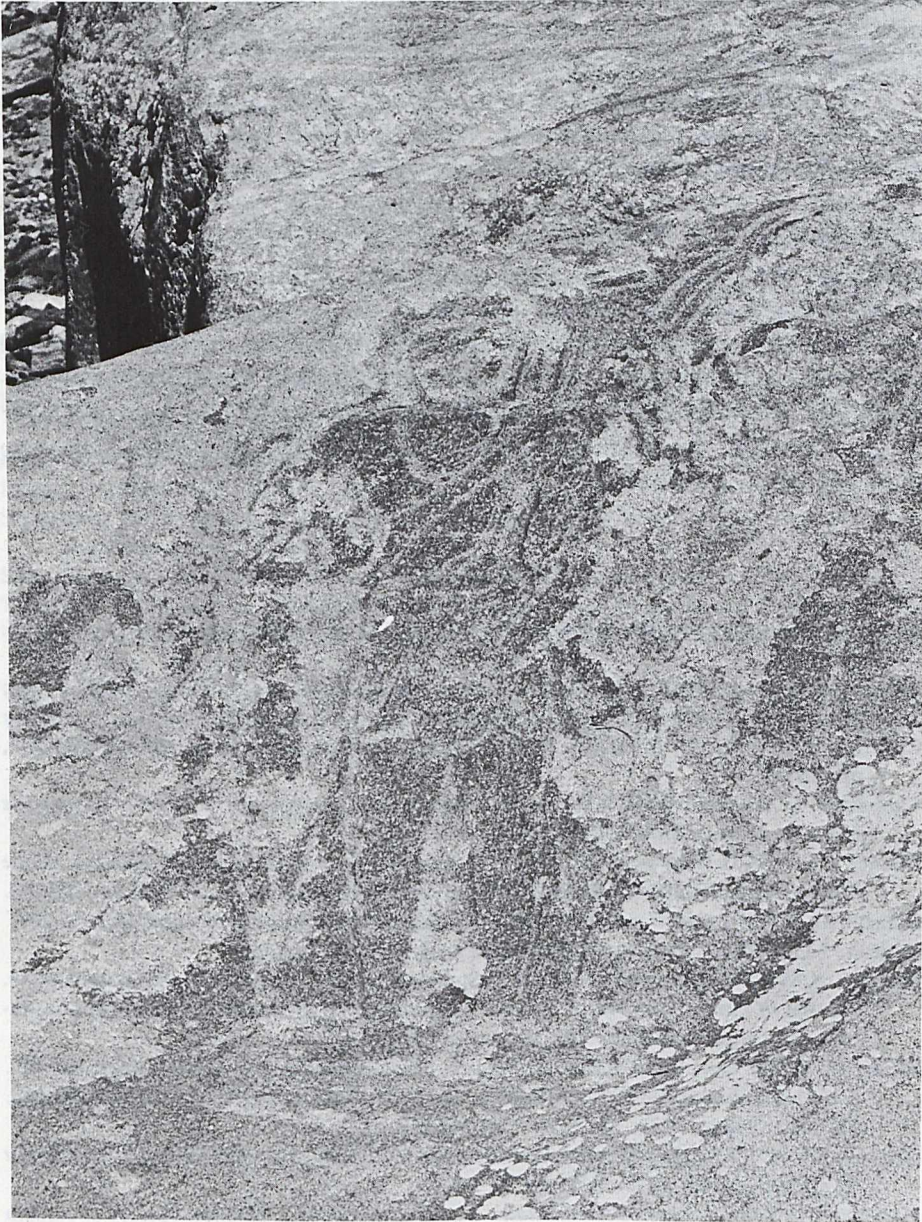


Fig. 10 — Very flat Buddhist reliefs near the mouth of the Shigar valley. Only the figure of a Bodhisattva can clearly be identified. For further investigation, cleaning of the rock and careful plaster-casts are necessary. (Photo Hauptmann).

Baltistan. They should be documented and studied as soon as possible. In the basin of Skardu many short inscriptions are already destroyed as the inhabitants of the next hamlets are blasting the rocks because they want squared stones for their modern houses.

2) In the Indus valley below the Rondu gorge, it is very difficult to find proper places for excavation. When the Indus valley was blocked by a landslide and the natural dam finally broke, water came down in a terrible rush up to 30 m high, washing away all sorts of old buildings and other remains. For settlements at a higher level, however, proper sites for buildings and fields were re-used until today. There was no shifting over to new places since prehistoric periods.

In Baltistan the bottoms of the valleys are flat, rivulets from the side-valleys change their course again and again and settlements move accordingly. Inundations do not become destructive, they just deposit a layer of silt. Therefore, below this cover there must be prehistoric and early historic sites waiting for excavation.

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