

Westerners beyond the Great Himalayan Range

Rock Carvings and Rock Inscriptions in the Indus Valley near Chilas

KARL JETTMAR
Heidelberg

Since 1979 thousands of rock-carvings and hundreds of inscriptions have been discovered in the mountain valleys north and northwest of Pakistan. One important concentration is in the famous Hunza valley, but the most impressive findings were made in the western part of the Diamir District, i.e., along the Indus River below Chilas. Some sites are situated in the Kohistan District which includes the left bank of the Indus east of the great bend of Sazin. With the help of my old friend, the late Ismail Khan, former Deputy Commissioner of Chilas, I got the chance to be the first visitor with scholarly interests to see and record most of the rock-carvings and inscriptions. Several preliminary reports appeared in the meantime.¹ Since 1980 a joint Pak-German team headed by Prof. Dani² and myself took over the difficult and almost infinite task of preparing scientific documentations fit to be published.

As for the inscriptions, they are in Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī, Proto-Śāradā and Śāradā, but there occur many Sogdian texts too, and even some in cursive Bactrian letters. So far, four Chinese inscriptions were located. I think, such findings have never before been made in the Indian Sub-continent (cf. map, Fig. 1).

The material is of no less importance to specialists of Buddhist art. Last summer our team noted 530 elaborate drawings of stupas, certainly most of them of the first millennium A.D. Some of them represent Central Asiatic types. We found 43 drawings of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, often inserted in multi-figurative scenes. Many of them are connected with

inscriptions of religious content mentioning eventually artist and sponsor. In this way the chronology of the art historian can be controlled by datings of the palaeographer.

Since the last campaign we know that this rock art has had a long prelude. The earliest carvings were done by Stone Age hunters stimulated by the desert varnish on the smooth rocks near the river, where even by simple pecking impressive pictures can be made visible from a great distance. Later on came herdsmen from the periphery of the Near Eastern Neolithic. Their drawings reflect the influence of painted pottery. We don't know whether the bearers of this tradition were Aryan tribes, but earlier or later Dardic, i.e., Northwest Indian languages were spread throughout the area. Only in the Gilgit valley and beyond, the pre-Indo-European Burushaski was prevalent.

Buddhism appeared here in the 1st century A.D., evidently brought by a garrison of semi-barbarian warriors who had been posted in the lowlands before.

Inscriptions and drawings of the time of the Great Kushans were observed exclusively in places situated on the direct road from Kashmir to the Tarim Basin (Alam Bridge, Hunza-Haldeikish).³

Petroglyphs of astonishing artistic perfection were made between the 5th and 8th centuries A.D. In this period the (present) Northern Areas were ruled by the Paṭola Śāhis.⁴ The name of their kingdom was Bolor as we learn from Chinese sources.⁵ The Śāhis were fervent Buddhists who had many foreigners in their service. Their official language was Sanskrit. Bolor included the Burushaski speaking area, and here the famous Gilgit Manuscripts were written and finally deposited inside a hollow stupa.⁶ By expanding to the North, Bolor controlled all important passes protecting trade and pilgrimage. Connections with Swat, Uraśa (=Hazara), and Kashmir were intense, and even influence of the art of the Gupta Empire reached this remote region. The invasion of the Tibetans during the 8th century could not entirely destroy the traffic system, but Buddhism was submitted to local transformations and later on merged with ideas derived from the Hindu revival in the plains.

Finally, Islamization of the area happened in a slow process which was finished only in the 9th century by pious Muslim officers of the Dogras.⁷

Certainly the most fascinating aspect of the petroglyphs is that we learn so much about connections with Central Asia and the Far East. Between the so-called Silk Roads and what is now Pakistan there was a sort of short-cut. Many travellers using this dangerous highroad have left their marks on the rocks — messengers and missionaries, merchants, artists and pilgrims.

But our material is so rich and so divergent that it can also serve as a basis for a contribution to a conference devoted to a quite different



Fig.1 Situation of newly discovered clusters of rock-carvings and inscriptions in North Pakistan:

1. Hunza-Haldeikish, 2. Chilas I, 3. Chilas II, 4. Shatial Bridge, 5. Thor/Northern Bank, 6. Hodar, 7. Thalpan.

The rock-carvings at Alam Bridge are marked x.

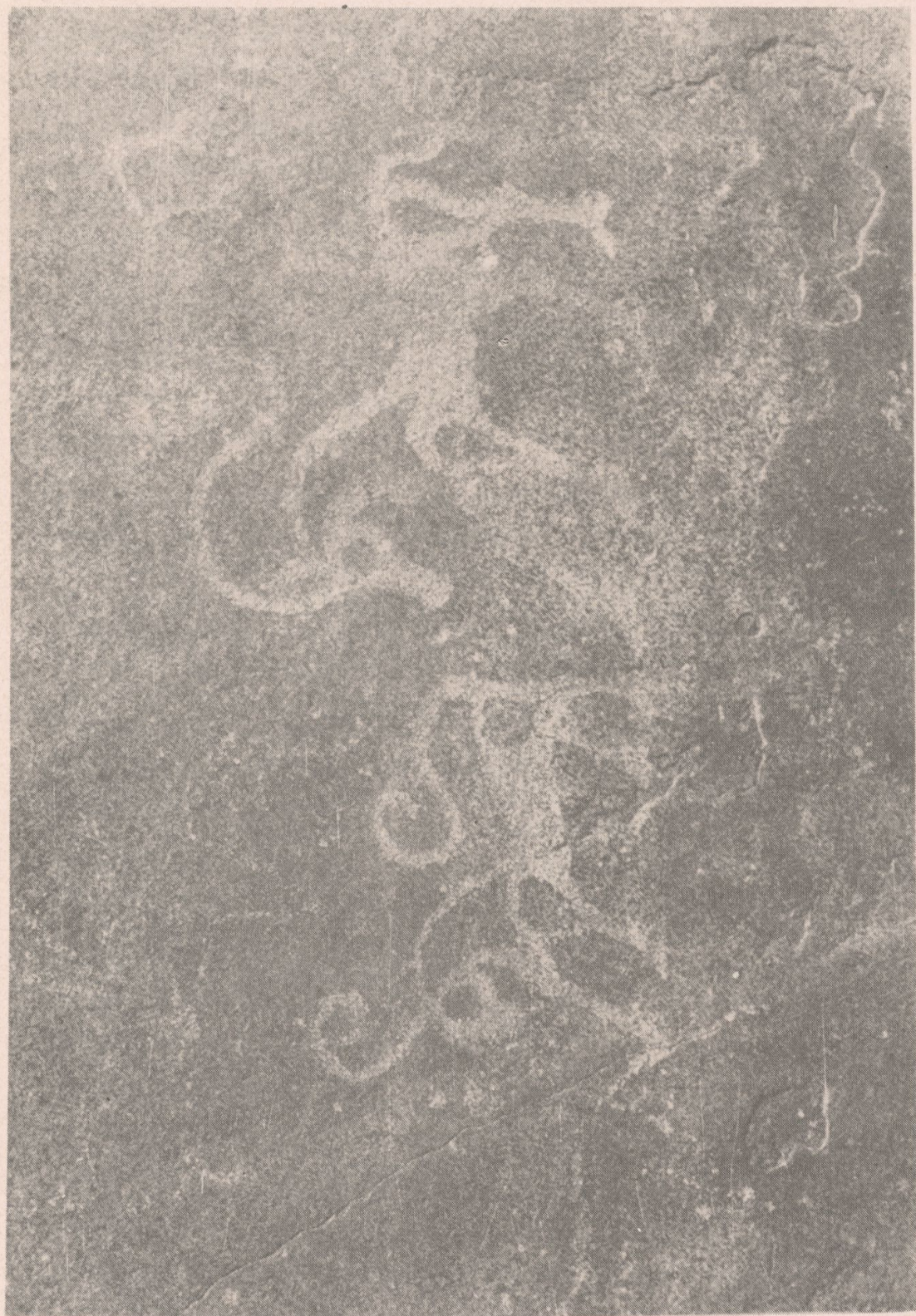


Fig.2 "Strutting animals". Rock-carving in Achaemenid tradition at Thalpan, Altar Rock.



Fig.3 Fantastic animal at Thalpan, Altar Rock.

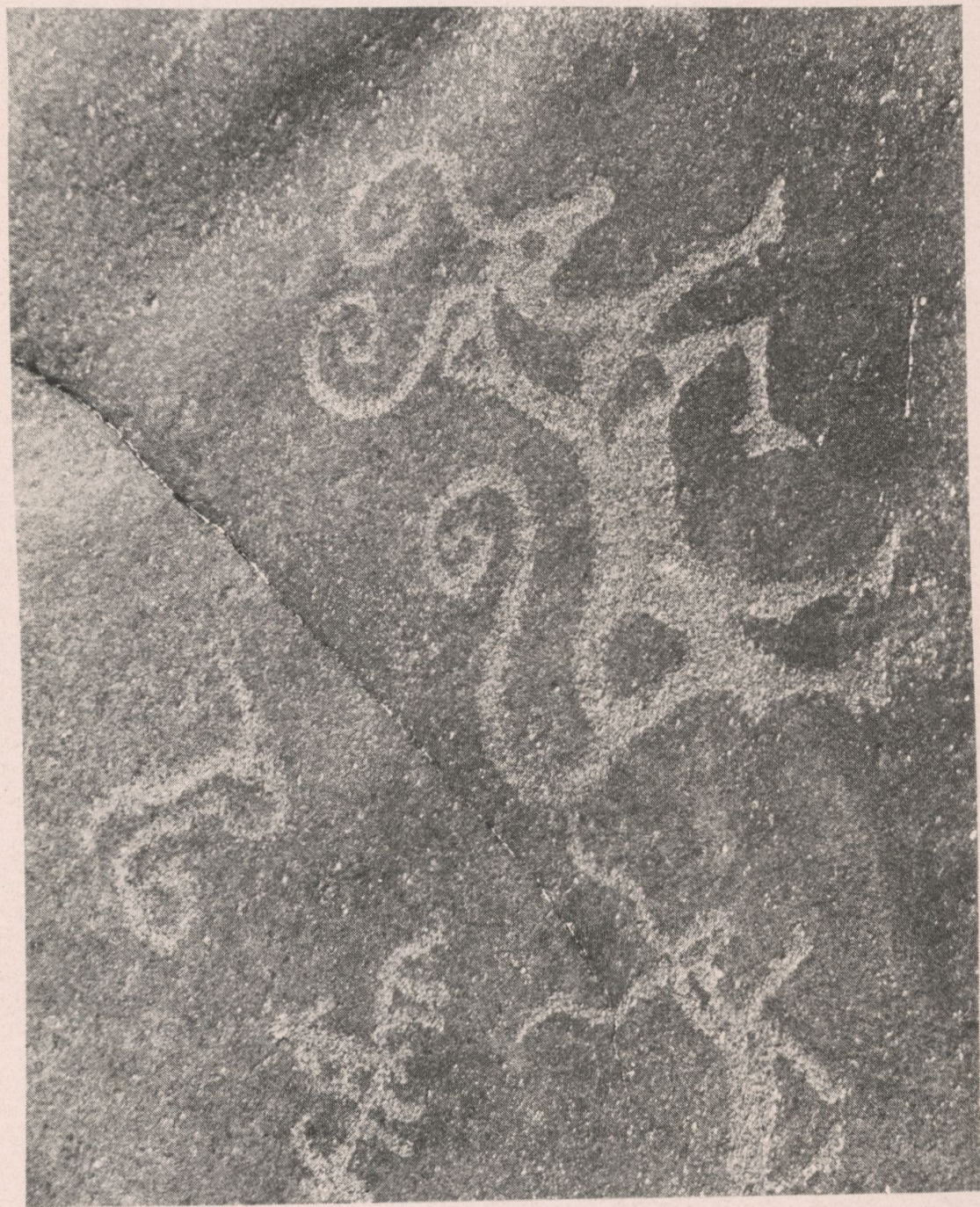


Fig. 4 Fantastic animal at Thalpan, Altar Rock (stylistically later).



Fig.5 Marching warrior with spear. Thalpan, Altar Rock.



Fig.6 Man, ready to slaughter a goat. Thalpan, Altar Rock.

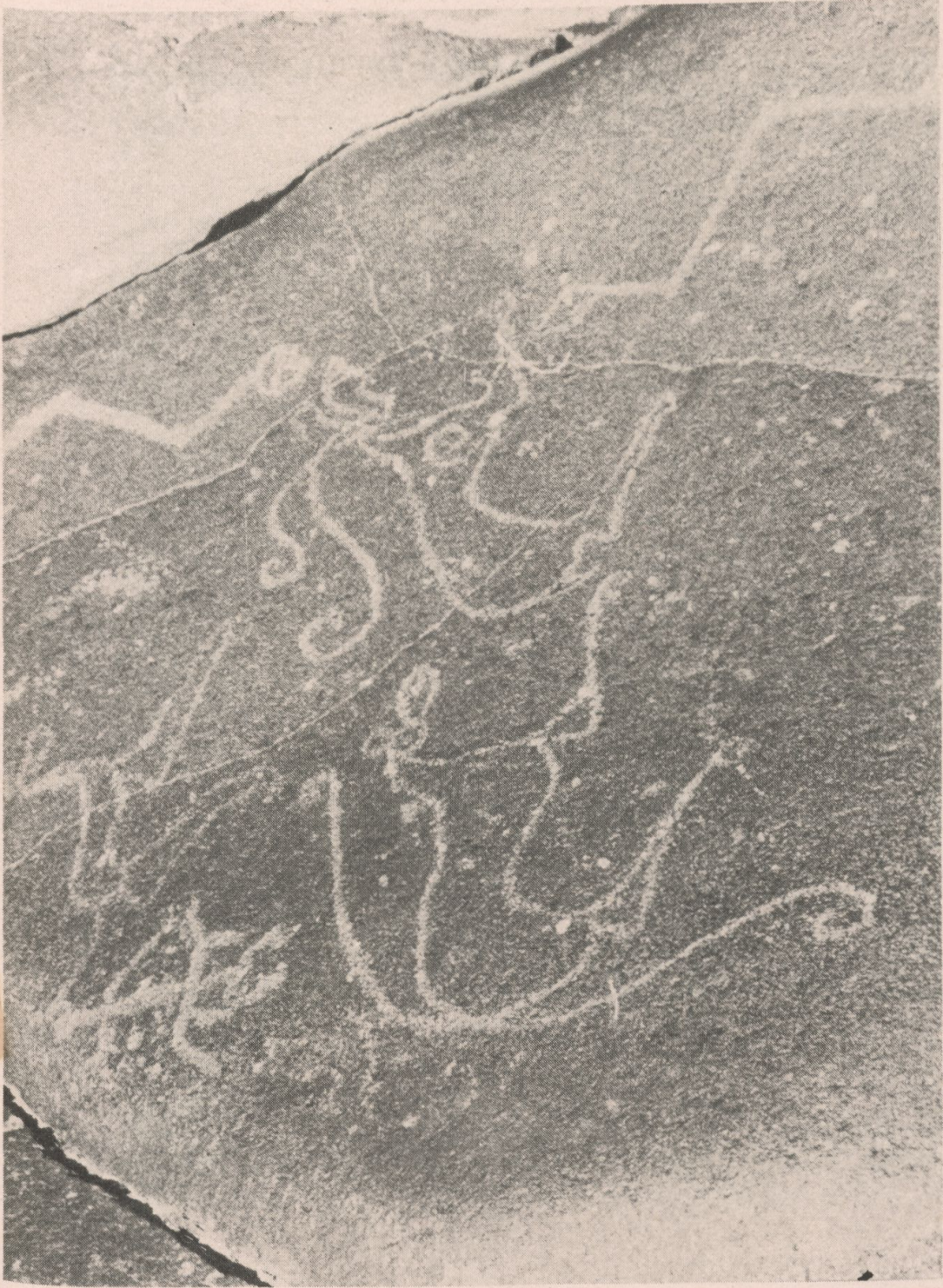


Fig.7 Animal Style carvings on the Altar Rock, Thalpan.
Horned animal pursued by beast of prey. The attacking snakes are later additions.



Fig. 8 Horned animal, near the mouth of the Minar-gah, west of Chilas.

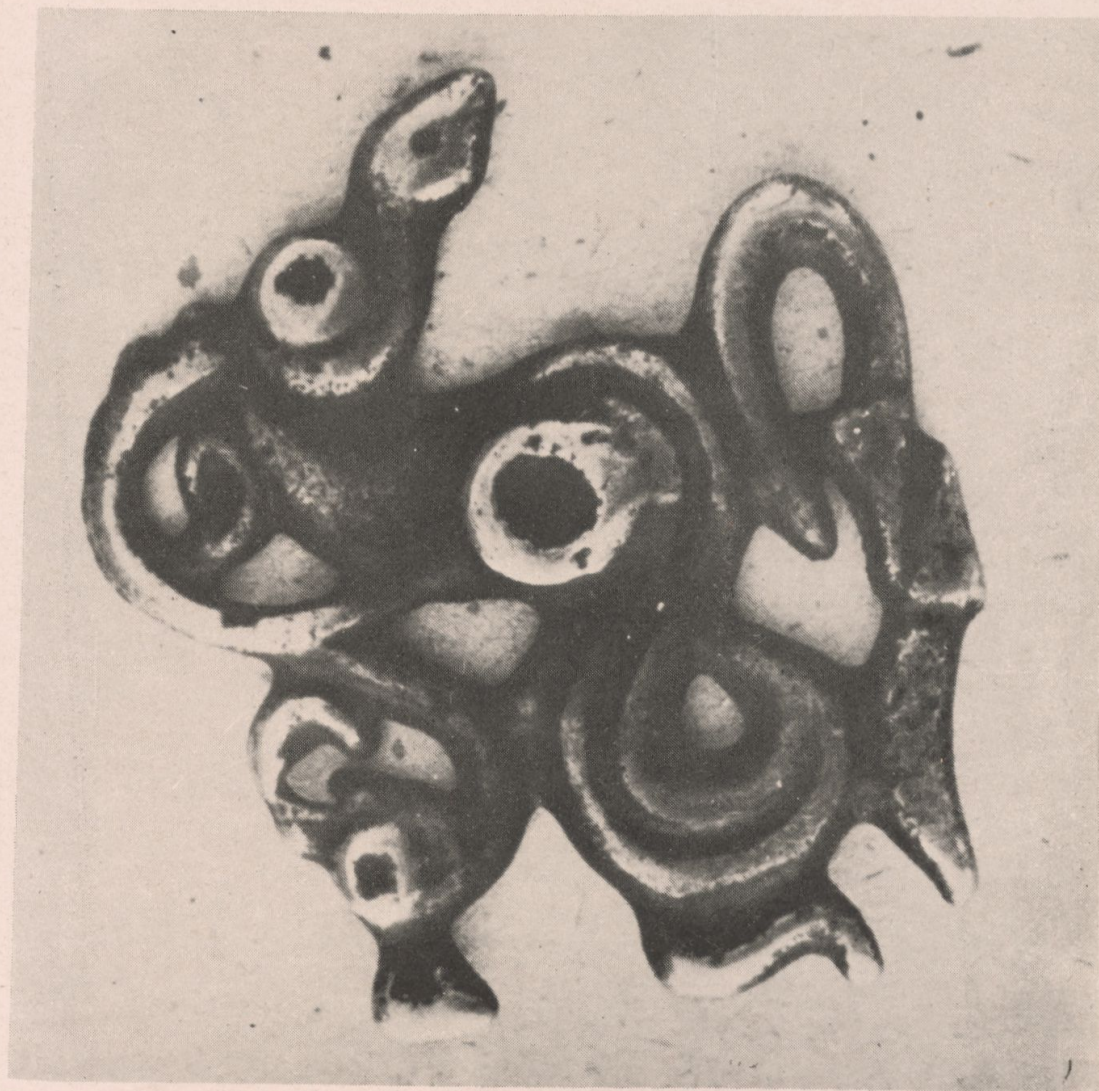


Fig.9 Bronze plaque, acquired in Kandia, Indus-Kohistan. 4,8 cm (from tail to nose of the animal).



Fig.10. Man in Sogdian dress venerating a stupa (Ziarat II).

problem, that is to say, the relations between the Subcontinent and Western Countries.

Arguments for such connections during an early period, namely, the time when the Persian Empire extended up to the Indus, are to be found opposite of Chilas near the village of Thalpan. Here a sandy plain sloping to the river is dominated by bulwark-like rocks almost sure to have been used as a pre-Buddhist sanctuary. The spot where the altar stood is still recognizable. The smooth surfaces below and to the sides of this "Altar Rock" are decorated with many carvings. Only a few of them belong to the Buddhist period. A Kharoṣṭhī inscription, the only one found on the right bank of the Indus River, belongs to this complex.

In a prominent position, however, we saw animal drawings of a distinctive form of stylization. The figures are filled in by peckings, but shoulders and buttocks are exempted resulting in comma-shaped decorations. The neck is stressed by a similar figure. One front-leg is always advanced indicating a majestic pace. What we see here is clearly a simplified sample of the official art of the Achaemenid court. The comma-shaped designs correspond to inlays on metal objects or appliqué work known from preserved textiles (Fig. 2).

Achaemenidic art was extremely syncretistic absorbing most of the tendencies of peoples included in the large empire. Several of them used a device which we call in German "Knielauf", i.e., one shank of the walking figure is bent backwards at an angle of 90 degrees.

"Knielauf" can be seen, for instance, in an Urartean wallpainting in a fortress excavated in Soviet Transcaucasia⁸ (Fig. 3). The same stylistic element occurs repeatedly in the rock-carvings at Thalpan. And here too we have the body markings which already are identified as being of western origin (Figs 3, 4).

On the same rock, three human figures are depicted, one moving a strange variation of the "Knielauf", the next one is a marching warrior, breast and shoulders seen frontally, head as well as feet from the side. The man holds a spear pointing downwards (Fig. 5). This is a typical Near Eastern motif, and the dress belongs to the same context. Below a belt his robe ends in many tassels, leggings are fixed to the shoes by straps. Edith v. Porada informed me that such figures might belong to the Late Parthian period, but there is no perfect congruence with the wellknown statues or reliefs.⁹ The third figure holds a large knife in one hand ready to slaughter a goat hanging down from his other hand. The posture is known from Near Eastern seals. Marks on the body of the goat point in the same direction (Fig. 6).

The sources of the different elements are quite clear while the dating remains controversial. We may put this complex into the first centuries A.D., but in this case the petroglyphs must have been made by members of

a tribe or military unit preserving Achaemenid traditions. Some peculiarities of the dress (e.g. the broad belt) point to Transcaucasian representations made not later than the first half of the first millennium B.C. We have to consider that only a few miles off rock-carvings and inscriptions of the 1st century A.D. were found, i.e., certainly contemporary with the Parthian period. The warriors depicted in those carvings wear a different dress.

Let us face the question: Who made such archaic pictures in such a remote area? A romantic idea would be to explain them as produced by soldiers of a Persian detachment posted on the eastern frontier of the Empire and retreating during the invasion of Alexander the Great into the sheltering mountains. Or we could assume that such a unit was posted later on along the upper course of the Indus because from this area came the gold which was an essential tribute of the easternmost provinces.

The situation is complicated by the fact that on the same Altar Rock, less than one metre off, there are linear carvings featuring a horned animal apparently a stag followed by a beast of prey with two tails. The shoulder of the stag is decorated by a spiral hook. Its nose is bent downwards resembling the snout of an elk (Fig. 7). Here we are surely confronted with typical samples of the so-called Scytho-Siberian Animal Style, the art of the nomads between Eastern Europe and the borders of China. It must be mentioned that no deer as seen here is found in the local fauna.

We might get an easy explanation for the appearance of Animal Style, if we could date the drawing into the 2th century B.C. or later. This was the time when the Sakas, called Sai by the Chinese, marched from Central Asia southwards into India where they founded several principalities. According to the same source they went over the "hanging passages" which certainly means that they used the straight route through the Karakorum, crossing the Indus River somewhere near Chilas.¹⁰

Unfortunately the stylistic peculiarities of other Animal Style drawings which we found in the meantime do not allow such a smooth explanation. A horned animal seen by us west of Chilas is depicted with long stretched legs as if standing on tiptoes (Fig. 8). This posture is frequent in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. The Animal Style of Chilas, in the meantime documented by approximately a dozen carvings, was evidently influenced by several consecutive impacts from the Steppes.¹¹

One argument more for my thesis is the astonishing fact that I could acquire a bronze plaque, a masterpiece of Animal Style Art, in Kandia, in fact the remotest corner of Indus — Kohistan (Fig. 9). It shows a crouching ibex. The body is twisted into an S-spiral. On the shoulder there is an empty round embedding as meant for a precious stone. A part of the antlers is transformed into a bird's head. The proto-type was a

plaque in the shape of a crouching deer as known from the Pamirs. There the feet of the animal are rendered in the same manner. The plaque, now handed over to the Department of Archaeology and Museums, was cast between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C., hardly later.¹²

Some of the nomads may have remained in the mountains using the same place for sanctuary as the Achaemenid warriors, namely, the Altar Rock. During this coexistence the inherited motives and stylistic tendencies were perpetuated in a rather superficial — we could say, heraldic — way, may be for centuries. So we have Animal Style drawings without the former elegance on the one hand, and rather clumsy “Achaemenoid” pictures on the other one (cf Fig. 4).

If we include Sogdiana into the countries of the West, a much later group of carvings must be mentioned. Many ideas and technical traditions common in the Near East were brought along the Silk Road to China. The chief operators of the Silk Roads however were the Sogdians, the people living in the oases of Transoxania. Samarkand, the Maracanda of Alexander's time, was their capital. Sogdian traders spread the great religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism.

In recent years we have learnt that they made use of many elements of Indian iconography up to the 8th century A.D., shortly before they were subjugated by Arab armies and forcibly converted to Muslim faith. In the palaces of their nobility excavated by Soviet scholars there were found wallpaintings with Indian motives showing Indian deities, e.g., a dancing Shiva and the god Veshparkar identified by his name written below.¹³

Since the discovery of rock-carvings in the Indus Valley we may guess by which route Sogdians reached India even at the time when the normal routes through Tukhāristan were blocked by the Muslims. Following a track via Chitral, the Shandur pass, Ghizr, Tangir they went down to the Indus. The spot where they crossed the river near Shatial is marked by a sanctuary where hundreds of Sogdian inscriptions were found. These tell us the names of the travellers. Some were Buddhists, but their names are derived from Iranian deities. Forty miles up the river, in the site Ziarat II, I saw a composition showing the veneration of a stupa by a man in Sogdian dress. Evidently the artist had used his sketch-book very skilfully. The incense burner in his right hand was perhaps originally something else — a flower or a wine cup (Fig. 10).

In conclusion, we may say that foreign influences in the rock-carvings of the remote Chilas area give us a surprising insight in political and cultural contacts during the pre-Buddhist periods of the Subcontinent revealing some hitherto unknown western impacts.

NOTES

1. Jettmar, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1980d, 1982.
2. Dani, 1981.
3. cf. Fussman, 1978, pp. 54-56.
4. v. Hinueber, 1979, 1980.
5. Jettmar, 1980e.
6. Jettmar, 1981.
7. Biddulph, 1880/1971, pp. 113-25.
8. Truhtina, Hodžaš, Oganjesjan, 1968.
9. Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 78-107.
10. Hulsewé, 1979, p. 105.
11. Šer, 1981, p. 246.
12. Litvinskij, 1972, pp. 60-68, 113.
13. Belenickij, Maršak in Azarpay, 1981, pp. 26-35.

REFERENCES

- G. Azarpay, 1981: Sogdian Painting — The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art. Contributions by A.M. Belenickij, B.I. Marshak and M.J. Dresden. Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- J. Biddulph, 1880/1971: Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh, Calcutta, reprint Graz.
- A. H. Dani, 1981: Karakorum Highway Unfolds the Romance of the Past, Islamabad.
- G. Fussman, 1978: Inscriptions de Gilgit, in: Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient, LXV, pp. 1-6, pls. I-XXXII.
- R. Girshman, 1962: Iran, Parther und Sassaniden, München.
- O. von Hinueber, 1979: Die Erforschung der Gilgit-Handschriften (Funde buddhistischer Sanskrit-Handschriften, I). Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, I. Philol.-hist. Klasse, Jahrg. 1979, Nr. 12, pp. 329-359, Göttingen.
- 1980: Die Kolophone der Gilgit-Handschriften. Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik, ed. o. von Hinueber, G. Klingenschmitt, A. Wezler und M. Witzel, Festschrift Paul Thieme, H. 5-6, pp. 49-82, Reinbek.
- A. F.P. Hulsewé, 1979: China in Central Asia. The Early Stage: 125 B.C. - A.D. 23. Sinica Leidensia, Fol. XIV, Leiden.
- K. Jettmar, 1980a: Felsbilder und Inschriften am Karakorum Highway, in: Central Asiatic Journal, XXIV/3-4, pp. 185-221.
- 1980b: Bolor-Zum Stand des Problems, Zentralasiatische Studien, 14/2, pp. 115-32.
- 1980c: The Visitors' Book of a Silk Road. Rockcarvings and Inscriptions in Northern Pakistan. German research reports of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2-3/80, pp. 6-9.
- 1980d: Neuentdeckte Felsbilder und-inschriften in den Nordgebieten Pakistans. Allgemeine und vergleichende Archäologie-Beiträge, Bd. 2, München, pp. 151-99.
- 1980e: Bolor and Dardistan, Islamabad.
- 1981: The Gilgit Manuscripts: Discovery by Instalments, in: Journal of Central Asia, IV/2, pp. 1-17.
- 1982: Rockcarvings and Inscriptions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Islamabad.
- B. A. Litvinskij, 1927: Drevnie kočevniki "kryši mira", Moskva.
- J. Šer, 1981: Petroglifi Srednei i Central'noj Azii, Moskva.
- N. S. Truhtina, S.I. Hodžaš K.L. Oganjesjan, 1968: Rospisi Ėrebuni. Soobščeniija Gos. Muzeja Izobr. iskusstv. im. A.S. Puškina, IV, Moskva.