

THE “SUSPENDED CROSSING” — WHERE AND WHY?

Already the history of the former Han Dynasty presents a clear description of the route connecting the southern branch of the silk roads in the Tarim Basin with the northwestern corner of the South Asian subcontinent, an area called Chi-pin. (For the attempts to define an exact location s. Petech 1950: 63-79, Pulleyblank 1963: 218).

Thanks to Hulsewé (1979: 110-111) we can now make use of a modern and well-commented translation. The text of the relevant passage runs as follows:

“All cases in which we have sent envoys to escort visitors back have been due to our wish to provide them with defensive protection against the danger of robbery. But starting in the area south of P’i-shan, one passes through some four or five states which are not subject to Han. A patrol of some hundred officers and men may divide the night into five watches and, striking their cooking pots [to mark the hours] so keep guard, but there are still occasions when they will be subject to attack and robbery. For asses, stock animals and transported provisions, they depend on supplies from the various states to maintain themselves. But some of the states may be poor or small and unable to provide supplies, and some may be refractory and unwilling to do so. So our envoys clasp the emblems of mighty Han and starve to death in the hills and valleys. They may beg, but there is nothing for them to get, and after ten or twenty days man and beast lie abandoned in the wastes never to return. In addition, they pass over the ranges [known as the hills of the] Greater and the Lesser Headache, and the slopes of the Red Earth and the Fever of the Body. These cause a man to suffer fever; he has no colour, his head aches and he vomits; asses and stock animals all suffer in this way. Furthermore there are the Three Pools and the Great Rock Slopes, with a path that is a foot and six or seven inches wide, but leads forward for a length of thirty li, overlooking a precipice whose depth is unfathomed. Travellers passing on horse or foot hold on to one another and pull each other along with ropes; and only after a journey of more than two thousand li do they reach the Suspended Crossing. When animals fall, before they have dropped half-way down the chasm they are shattered in pieces, and when men fall, the situation is such that they are unable to rescue one another. The danger of these precipices beggars description.”

There is another remark (Hulsewé 1979: 99) in the same chapter, 96 A, also stressing the dangerous character of the place. It is even said that the inhabitants of Chi-pin are quite unable to traverse them (Hulsewé 1979: 109). But this must be an exaggeration since we learn in chapter 96 B that the king of the Sai and his followers moved south via the Suspended

Crossing in order to conquer Chi-pin (Hulsewé 1979: 144). So at least the ruling group of this country had been able to face the difficulties of this mountain path.

In the map added to one of his books Herrmann (1910) proposed a rather exact location of this obstacle in the upper part of the Karumbar valley, now wrongly called Ishkuman, northwest of Gilgit. In the recent edition of his historical atlas of China (1935/1966, map 16) the "Hanging Passages" (alternative translation of Suspended Crossing) are identified with the Hunza valley and Shimshal. The argumentation is based on the experience of modern travellers who found there the most difficult mountain paths. Moreover, the starting point of the ancient Chinese envoys was rather far to the East, at P'i-shan, between Karghalik and Khotan, so we may imagine a track like that preferred by the famous robbers from Hunza — via Shimshal, Raskam and the Yarkand-valley.

Another possibility is certainly the proposal that the Suspended Crossing/Hanging Passages were in fact nothing else than the gorges of the Indus starting a few miles west of the modern village Sazin, the region where the Indus turns southwards to break through the last barrier of mountains before reaching the plains.

The famous monk Fa-hsien travelling in the beginning of the 5th century A.D. certainly considered these gorges as the most difficult part of his route (Legge 1886/1981: 26). According to his description the wanderer is walking "along a hill — like wall of rock, 10.000 cubits from the base", i.e. the Indus. After crossing the river there is only a short way to Uḍḍiyāna, i.e. Swat. Petech in his analysis of the Shui-ching-chu has examined the arguments very carefully (1950: 16-19). Evidently he was impressed by the opinions of Sven Hedin and Herrmann, so he conceded that Fa-hsien had in his mind certainly the gorges of the Indus, the earlier source, however, may speak of a more northern hindrance. Petech identified the "plain" which is reached soon after the "Crossing" (according to Kuo I-Kung) with the valley of the Gilgit river.

In the meantime Sir Aurel Stein as the first European had experienced and described the route through the gorges. In one of his last articles he quotes the description of Fa-hsien and even mentions the report from the Han period (1942: 49, 55). Stein was convinced that the Suspended Crossing, called by him "route of the hanging chains" was here and nowhere else. In fact, his description is convincing, and my friend Brigadier Jan, the man who devoted years of his life to the task of exploring Indus-Kohistan and re-organizing its economy, told me almost the same. Sir Aurel Stein wrote:

"Our progress down the Indus during the next few weeks showed only too clearly what was meant by Fa-hsien's reference to those many 'rock steps', as the translation puts it. On all the eleven trying marches which took us down to where we turned off from the Indus to follow the route up the Ghorband valley to Swat, there was daily a constant succession of tiring ascents to be made. The track climbs up steeply ridge after ridge, each rising sometimes as much as 1000 feet or more above the river, in order to avoid impassable cliffs. From the heights thus gained there were invariably descents, often quite as tiring, to be made again towards the river. Nowhere was it possible to keep for any distance near to the river bank since masses of huge boulders line it wherever the river does not actually wash the foot of impassable rock walls. I have not counted all the climbs, but they must have been still more numerous before the recent track was constructed. When this was being made the men had often to be suspended from pegs while they were at work boring holes to blast the rock or to fix in fissures the tree branches which were to support galleries" (Stein 1942: 55).

But there remains something which I absolutely could not understand. It was so disturbing to me that I was rather inclined to accept the more vague solution of Petech: Coming from the North the traveller was forced to ascend a high pass either the Kilik (4755 m) or the Mintaka (4629 m) or the Shimshal (4787 m) and to march through the difficult Hunza valley. A roundabout track via the Mustagh pass in the East or via the Karumbar valley in the West would have been by no means easier. Only the long detour leading to the Wakhan and then crossing the Baroghil and the Darkot passes would make some difference. So there was no choice. But why should Chinese envoys and pilgrims have chosen a route skirting the precipices of the Indus valley? Compared with this gorge all passes crossing the ridges in this 35° latitude are completely harmless. The Babusar pass is (almost) a low promenade (only 4148 m high) and the approach through the Thor valley is also without problems. It did not make any sense to me that an extremely tiring and dangerous passage was preferred to traverses which are perfectly fit for horses.

In the meantime I learned on the spot that there were very good reasons why the more comfortable passes could not be used. I will try to explain the reason as concisely as possible.

The best time for travelling through the mountain valleys via the passes north of the 36° latitude was — until recently — late autumn and early winter, before it becomes really cold and snowfall (never as heavy as farther south) closes the high passes. In this season the rivers are already reduced and can rather easily be forded. The raids of the Hunza men robbing caravans in the Tarim Basin and on the track to the

Karakorum pass were deliberately adapted to this time-table (Müller-Stellrecht 1978: 86). As the best illustration of the difference between travelling in summer and in winter we may use the statistical material handed over to Prof. Haserodt by the WAPDA Lahore, the Agency for planning dams and irrigation systems. They indicate that the monthly quantity of water, passing the water gauge at "Dainyour", (i.e. the discharge of the Hunza river at its mouth) is extremely changing according to season. Here I want to compare the relevant figures only: In 1971 the relation between the defluxion during the travel period (November-January) and the summer maximum between June and September was 1:25. 1972 was a rather moderate year, the winter quantity was surpassed in summer 20 times, but in 1973 the difference was 1:40. This gives me an explanation why in the Northern Areas of Pakistan normally more people are killed by drowning than by falling from the mountain tracks. Only climber expeditions and jeep-traffic have somewhat distorted the statistic evidence.

In the mountains south of the great furrow (Gilgit valley-Rondu-Shyok) the situation is quite different. The area is affected by clouds brought by the winds from the South. Satellite photographs are the best proof. The result is early and heavy snowfall, not as much in the valleys but on the mountains, closing the passes.

The range immediately south of the Gilgit valley is impassable for a short period only. The higher ranges to the East and to the West of the southern flank of the Nanga Parbat however, are blocked by snow for most of the year. In fact, the jeep-road via the Babusar pass, now in bad repair and practically out of use, was open only from May/June to August/September. Even men on foot were endangered by avalanches.

That means that travellers from the South had to start not later than August. Afterwards they had to stay in the Transhimalayas for three months, and only then they could venture to continue to the North crossing the rivers, now already at low level, while the passes were still open.

The way back needed an expanded interval as well. Starting from the northwestern corner of the Tarim Basin in November, wanderers reached the Indus valley west of the Nanga Parbat in January, and then they had to stay there until May/June.

Certainly many travellers accepted the rule of the game. Among them were the foreign artists who for a while lived near Chilas or Shatial in local monasteries. They had plenty of time to produce petroglyphs using the local technique (picking or engraving the rock), but following the

stylistic tradition of their homelands. (Jettmar 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1982, 1983a, 1983b).

The pre-historic and early historic migrants, for instance the Saka tribes who brought their cattle with them, certainly appreciated the slow and discontinued kind of migration. They had better arms than the locals and could require provisions if needed. Some of them settled down as "lords of the mountains". (The problem is dealt with in my forthcoming article *Prähistorische Wanderrouen in den Zentralasiatischen Hochgebirgen*, Smolla-Festschrift).

Diplomatic missions, merchants, and Buddhist pilgrims had a time-saving but dangerous way to shorten the procedure. They could use the only permanent open connection between the Transhimalayan zone and the South, namely the Suspended Crossing. In this way they could start in October/November and reach their destination area in January. Such journeys were feasible in both directions.

A few ethnographic observations may be added.

The footpath to the gorges of the Indus was used until the first unmetalled road replaced it at the end of the sixties. When this footpath was used by pedlars coming from the North, they had to leave the bank of the Indus between Shatial and Sazin and to climb up to a place near the village of Sazin, approximately 300 metres higher than the bottom of the Indus valley. Here a group of stone slabs marked the beginning of the most dangerous part of the track. It was practicable only because tree branches had been fixed in "fissures on the rock supporting galleries", steps had been carved out, on many places there were logs with notches to be used as ladders. The Sazinis were in charge of the repair, therefore, they had the right of toll to be paid at the place marked by the menhirs. The travellers tried to avoid the expenses so they made detours and were many times picked up by the youths of the village. This was considered as a sport, the toll did not much increase after detection. Most of the time, the track climbed up and down through the precipices. Only at Jalkot, at the mouth of two large valleys, the dangerous part of the journey came to an end. Here and in some places farther south, it was possible to cross the Indus. During winter-time cliffs in the middle of the river were connected by tree-trunks forming temporary foot-bridges. From such places, the track to Swat was not too difficult.

Many of the passengers were pedlars from the South, from Pattan. They made their tours to the North late in the year, when agricultural work was finished and the villagers lived in the compact settlements situated in the lower parts of the valleys. The pedlars always went on in

groups carrying their loads in barrows which could be raised or let down by ropes at places where the men had to use the ladders.

Maybe this confirmation that the Suspended Crossing was indeed identic with the gorges of the Indus will help us to solve other problems. Since the Suspended Crossing is so far to the South, Wu-ch'a corresponding to an original *Uḍa (Hulsewé 1979: 97-99, 101-104) was certainly not located somewhere between the Badakhshan and Sarikol. The text says clearly that it is east of the Suspended Crossing. Only the Kaghan valley, or parts of Azad Kashmir fit into this description. According to the Han-shu it is east of Chi-pin (Hulsewé 1979: 99). Now in the *Records of the Western Lands* translated and interpreted for instance by Watters (1904/1905 - 1973: I, 239) there is an enigmatic notice that Ta-li-lo was formerly the seat of the government of Uḍḍyāna/Wu-ch'ang. Ta-li-lo is identified with Darel, and the adjacent parts of the Indus valley.

Wu-ch'a and Wu-ch'ang were perhaps not only mixed up by modern authors (Lüders cf. Petech 1950: 18) but also by their ancient predecessors. If *Uḍa was the Kunhar-valley, also called Kaghan, it had perhaps a northern capital hidden behind the ranges, well protected against all enemies coming from the West or South. This would make more sense than a political connection with Swat, separated from Darel not by one but by several ridges. I don't dare to suppose an identification of *Uḍa with Oḍi, the country where vassals of the Kushans ruled and deposited a most important document in the centre of a stupa (Bailey 1980).

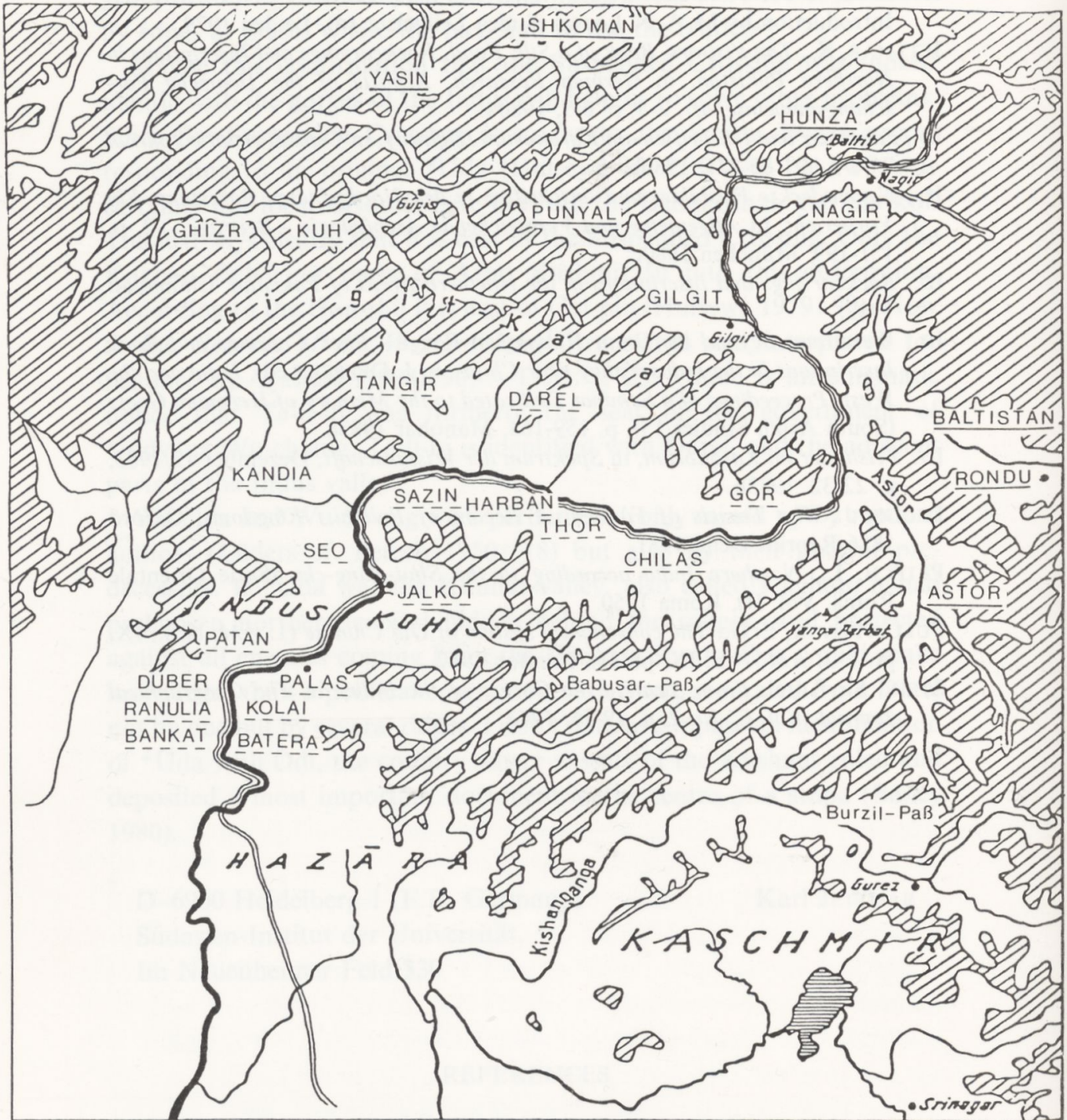
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Map of the Indus-Valley and the Adjacent Areas. The Karakorum Highway (====) corresponds roughly to the track used by Chinese pilgrims und diplomats. The "Hanging Passages" were between Sazin and Jalkot, all passes are closed there in winter.

(After Jettmar 1961, designed by V. Thewalt)

PUNYAL = former *statelets*

THOR = former *republics*