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Symbolic Systems in Collision: Rock Art in the Upper Indus Valley

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For the majority of scholars engaged in the study of the cultural history of Central Asia, it is not the rock art but the rock inscriptions, discovered since 1979 in the northern areas of Pakistan, which have proved to be more exciting. They reflect the religious sentiments of (mostly Buddhist) travellers and a few local dignitaries, and often also mention their names. There are a few royal inscriptions as well.[1]

Unfortunately, despite some fanciful readings that have been quoted in popular guidebooks for tourists, neither Gondophares, Maues, nor the Great Kushans are documented on the rocks along the Karakorum Highway. But initial results of epigraphical studies revealed the existence of important previously unknown feeder roads in the Silk Route system. It was therefore not difficult to enlist interested specialists as unpaid collaborators in the study of the material. In this context, specific mention should be made of the careful philological interpretation and publication of 604 Iranian inscriptions by Nicholas Sims-Williams.[2] The publication of all the Chinese inscriptions has appeared, with contributions from several specialists, including the late Ma Yong.[3] The final text was written by Thomas A. Höllamann, to which I added some comments.[4]

The most important group of Tibetan inscriptions has been discussed on the basis of translations offered by Klaus Sagaster.[5] Inscriptions, mostly Kharoṣhṭhī, from the site of Hunza-Haldeikish were first published by A.H. Dani.[6] A further study by G. Fussman on the same material, together with my own comments on animal drawings from the

site, will go to press soon. As for the Brāhmī inscriptions, they are so numerous that only 350, a small portion of the total, have been edited so far by Sander, Dani, Von Hinüber and Fussman.[7] But the samples were so well selected that they provide reliable information on dating and content.[8]

The rock pictures are exclusively petroglyphs: no paintings were found. In some instances the petroglyphs are associated with inscriptions that were evidently made by the same person. Since it is possible to date most inscriptions by a combination of palaeography, technical observations and historical argument, these examples appear to offer a guideline for researching the artistic development, But this approach is only feasible for a part of the material. Evidently it does not work for all periods. Many bruisings and engravings were certainly made before the arrival of the first Buddhist preachers in the second or first century BC.[9] Still, when we exclude these earlier products (which mostly show a stronger degree of repatination), there remains a large stock of material, which in style and content lies outside the spectrum of Buddhist art.[10]

The appearance of a non-Buddhist component is not surprising in itself. In many Buddhist countries, apart from the more or less orthodox or, at least, compatible beliefs and rituals of the political and spiritual elite, there was a complementary popular religion, better suited to the way of life of mountain peasants, herdsmen and hunters. In connection with Tibet, the popular religion, also called the "religion without name", has been described by the excellent scholars, Helmut Hoffmann, Raoul Stein and Giuseppe Tucci.[11] However, there is a crucial difference here to the normal combination "official Buddhism/popular religion". The situation in and around the Indus valley was certainly more complicated. This has impeded and misled preliminary attempts by scholars to explain the religious background.

Reference to what we know about the geographical conditions and their consequences during the last centuries I believe may offer an explanation: between the gorges north of Nanga Parbat and those below Sazin, the Indus valley is certainly a crossroad, or rather a series of crossroads, a sort of "shuttle" between several "feeders" of the Silk Route. But it is surrounded by secluded valleys or cul-de-sacs, especially in winter when the passes are closed. The impressive description of the country by John Biddulph, quoted below, does not so much refer to the Gilgit valley (where he had his residence as the first and not too

successful British Political Agent), but to the Indus Valley near Chilas, which was called Shamīl or Shamīlān in the time of al-Bīrūnī:

> This immense mass of mountain is intersected by numerous deep valleys, and these, owing to some peculiar geological formation that I have not remarked in other parts of the Himalayas, are generally narrower at their mouths than higher up. It is not unusual to see among them valleys of 10 to 30 miles in length, supporting a population varying from 500 to 5,000 souls, with an embouchure so narrow that it is difficult to find a pathway beside the torrent which issues between overhanging rocks. In addition, the enormous rushes of water during the summer months from numerous and extensive glaciers and snow-fields impedes communication.
>
> Thus aided by nature in preserving their independence, and partially isolated from one another, the people of the country have formed themselves into a number of separate communities which have existed for generations within the same narrow limits.[12]

This area is now part of the Diamir district. Formerly it was known as "Yaghestan", the "Land of the Free", the "unconquerable rebels". We should only add that in the past there was even more social, ethnic and religious diversity than in recent centuries.

On the basis of the inscriptions already deciphered, I tried to imagine the situation of Shamīl between the fourth to eighth century A.D. and offered a preliminary, and in many respects tentative, interpretation of the different groups of rock art.[13] The arrangements for long distance trade were made by a nobility of mixed origin, who were affiliated to the main Buddhist schools such as the Sarvāstivāda. But visitors from many places brought unconventional ideas into the local monasteries. In contrast to countries such as Great Palūr (Baltistan) and Daraddeśa (the upper Kiṣangaṅgā valley), Shamīl was not part of a strong monarchy. It remained a buffer zone between the two above mentioned states and maintained its independence until the victorious Tibetans extended their territory far to the west. Even more importantly, the traders had to rely on the cooperation of the villagers in the immediate neighbourhood. The tribesmen provided the porters, guides and guards for the caravans; they also furnished the provisions. The Indus Valley itself is almost a barren desert. Near the entrance to each side valley, each tribe had a ceremonial centre, which was legitimised as a Buddhist sanctuary. Such places provided the opportunity for direct contact with visitors, some of whom

were integrated into the community and became the ancestors of important clans.

Perhaps the newcomers were gladly accepted, because there was constant competition between the tribes living in the secluded valleys. Evidently each group was eager to maintain its identity. Specific beliefs and customs were preserved and expressed by particular, exclusive symbols, which were already depicted in an idiosyncratic style. So all the communities living in the side valleys of the Indus together formed possibly a polyglot, but certainly a polygraphic (or polyiconic) society. This general concept needs to be put in more concrete terms by more detailed study. I was therefore grateful to the editor of *South Asian Studies* for allowing me to present one example that traced the development of the art of former mounted nomads who had been transformed into local landlords,[14] but who nevertheless retained some motifs of the Scytho-Siberian Animal Style as their heraldic signs throughout several centuries. Later warlike immigrants used tamgas, the new marks of horsemen, as alternatives. More studies are however necessary. We are currently preparing the publication of the individual sites (i.e., clusters of petroglyphs). Each site shows a preference for specific motifs that appear to reflect local traditions.

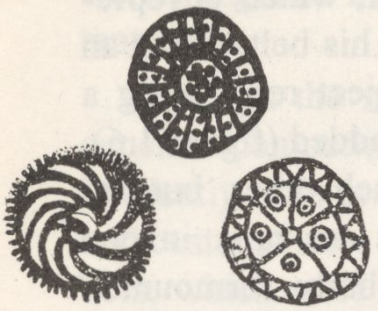
It is clear that this system of strained but peaceful coexistence collapsed in the eighth century A.D. Inscriptions belonging to later centuries are extremely rare in the area around Chilas (I know of only two examples). There was apparently also a decline in the number of petroglyphs perpetuating earlier distinctive traditions. With a few exceptions, the hitherto dominant Buddhist imagery became obsolete. There are interesting hunting and fighting scenes that can be attributed to later periods, but they were hardly made in a religious context.

There are, however, dense clusters of petroglyphs (see figure 1) that endlessly repeat the same set of motifs, some of which are almost unprecedented in the area, while others are quite new. A round disc with an extremely varied decoration, sometimes with a dentated border, was formerly rare. We could perhaps call it a *cakra* or holy wheel (figure 1.1). A new element is the battle-axe, that is often curved upwards, in contrast to the more usual shape (figure 1.2). A purely "local" symbol is the figure of a man with extended arms, large hands and open legs (figure 1.3). The ibex, always a popular motif, is now depicted with elongated horns extending the entire length of the body (figure 1.4). The horse only appears combined with a rider. In most cases the man is

depicted frontally, standing on the back of the horse, which is represented in profile. Often the man has a sword fixed to his belt, raises an axe in one hand and holds in the other, another object resembling a square bracket (figure 1.5). Occasionally the *cakra* is added (figure 1.6). However, the elements are not really fused with each other, but are rather an accumulation of icons. Real compositions are rare: in one example, an anthropomorphic figure has the disc for a body, surmounted by an axe or bird's head (figure 1.7). Elsewhere, a large axe is depicted across the simplified image of a stupa (figure 1.8). Other images show axes that are proportionally much larger than the human figures (apparently worshippers). In one instance, a rider with the ritual bow and axe is visible below the monumental axes (figure 1.9).

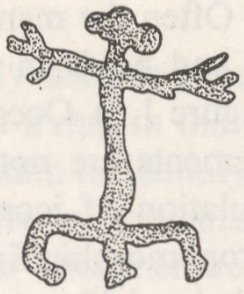
In 1984, when I published petroglyphs belonging to this category,[15] I tried to explain the transition to a barbaric, in fact provocative imagery, in terms of the historically well attested background of the invasions of the Tibetan armies and subsequent fruitless interventions by the Chinese. The results were ambiguous. When the time of troubles was over, there was a Buddhist revival, and even an unprecedented rise in Buddhist activities in a previously pagan region, namely the Gilgit valley. Here, petroglyphs made by sun worshippers are conspicuously absent, while many Buddhist monasteries are recorded there in the tenth century Saka Itinerary.[16] However, this Buddhist expansion favoured by the Tibetan invaders was contested by a strong anti-Buddhist movement that tried to establish a political system headed by a "sacred king", probably in support of the local dynasty. A note in the contemporary tenth century Persian geographical work *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, says that the ruler of Bolor proclaimed that "he is the Son of the Sun. And he does not rise from his sleep until the Sun has risen."[17] I viewed the relevant clusters of petroglyphs in the Indus valley not as creations by proper Bonpos, but as sanctuaries of a sect where local traditions merged with a heroic solar cult suddenly gained importance. Perhaps this alternative creed, that was more compatible with the Bon religion of Tibet, became dominant for a while.

What I did not know in 1984, and certainly could not expect, is the fact that there is no necessity to speculate about the competition between two rival religions. At sites near Chilas, where the rock faces and agglomerations of boulders are decorated with the full set of the heroic solar cult, confrontation and combat between believers is openly depicted. One rock carving at the mouth of the Thak valley portrays, in



1.a, b, c

2.a, b



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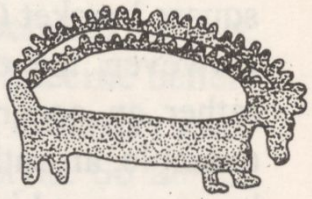

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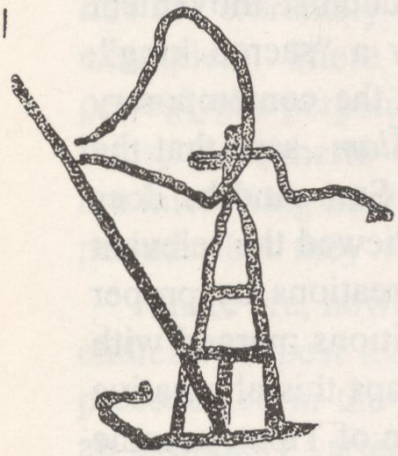

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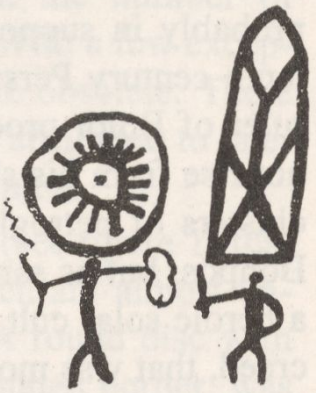

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addition to other symbols, two men fighting each other. One man stands under a large solar disc, the other one under an external simplified stupa design (figure 1.10).[18]

On the cliffs west of the mouth of the Hodar stream, a cluster of petroglyphs all depict emblems of the heroic solar cult. In the hollow of a large boulder, eroded by the water course, a dramatic scene is visible (figure 2). In the centre are several armed men, evidently hostile to each other, since some warriors are engaged in single combat. On the left side, one party defends a stupa, or rather a *mChod-rten* of the Tibetan type also depicted near Gakuch, in the Gilgit valley.[19] On the other side, a strange anthropomorphic being stands between the warriors. Body and limbs are rendered by lines, the head is a round disc, without doubt, a solar symbol. The left hand holds the hilt of a sword fixed to the belt. The right hand points to the stupa, as if directing the fighters of the attacking party. We might explain this kind of stylisation as a strange compromise between the pictorial and the abstract. The god is depicted as the leader in a martial scene, not in his iconic shape, but by straight

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Figure 1. Principal motifs on the petroglyphs of Chilas, including combinations and narrative scenes, as used by sun-worshippers.

1–4 *Basic elements, often appearing as isolated designs:*

1a–c Solar rosettes ("wheels", "shields") always with individual decorations.

2a–b Axes or ceremonial axes, frequently decorated.

3 Abstract human figure with extended arms, large hands and often only three fingers.

4 Ibex, with two exaggerated horns extending across the entire back.

5–7 *Combinations of the motifs, not always integrated, but only "agglutinated" - thus the man on horseback stands on the horse, his feet being later additions.*

5 Man (deity?) on horseback. The left hand extends to the large axe and the reins; the other hand is connected to an implement thus far unidentified (perhaps a bow). a weapon (club) is visible, attached to the belt.

6 Rider holding an axe, with the solar-rosette to the right.

7 The body of a human (with typical three-fingered hands) is designed as a rosette. The back on the head was formerly the blade of an axe.

8–10 *Narrative designs:*

8 Axe dominating a schematic stupa design.

9 Fully equipped horseman with axe and bow (?) under large, erect axe-shaped monuments (including a double axe).

10 Fighting figures, one under the sign of the solar deity, the other under the sign of the Buddhist faith.

Figure 2. Fight between the defenders of the stupa (left) and the sun-worshippers, attacking under command of their deity, drawn in simple lines. In the background a large object (sledge? boat?) is visible. Petroglyphic site: Hodar West.

and curved linear elements, comparable to the graffiti-like rendering of men or deities on earlier clusters. The images of the other figures in the scene are of varying, but much smaller size. However, the plastic shape of their bodies is indicated, with only the legs being subject to the traditional stylisation. In the background, a vessel or a sledge can be seen.

Tucci has already observed that no Buddhist monasteries are recorded in Silathasa (evidently Chilas) in the text of the Saka Itinerary.[20] Has the scene depicted at Hodar, a "bruised proclamation", something to do with the influence of a Hindu sect penetrating far into the mountains? Is it possible to identify this religious movement in written sources? Were the preachers refugees from the plains retreating after the victory of the Muslims?

The centre of sun worship for the whole subcontinent was Multan. Its sun temple, which attracted thousands of adherents, was extremely rich and therefore protected even after the Muslim conquest in A.D. 714, during the long permissive period which soon followed.[21]

According to Ibn Khurdābeh,[22] Multan was the starting point of a trade route connecting India with China *via* the northern mountain passes. The assessment of the situation in Derryl Maclean's book[23] led me to consider whether it was possible that adherents of a Hindu sect, almost monotheistic sun worshippers, the so-called Saura, had escaped to the mountain valleys in the north and spread their beliefs in former Buddhist territories. After all, Buddhism and Hinduism were antagonistic forces even in the lowlands. Moreover, some institutions and general concepts, such as a type of caste system, cremation and marriage customs, until recently preserved by the Shina-speaking population of Gilgit, definitely have Hindu nuances.[24]

Meanwhile, I realised that such a simple and clear solution is not sustainable. The fusion of foreign and local ideas leading to a coherent system was certainly a lengthy selective process needing centuries, not decades. Even in the period when the dominance of Buddhism was still uncontested, we find images of stupas, connected with inscriptions, but without the usual hemispherical dome. Instead we see an almost circular, decorated disc, with a central rosette, that is identifiable beyond any reasonable doubt as a solar symbol. So heliolatry was anticipated by a tradition with its origins in a distant past (figure 3).

When the temple for the god Surya was established at Mūlasthāna (Multan), exclusively qualified Magi priests from Eastern Iran (Sākadvīpa) were brought in to serve the sun god. For further developments, the rule of the Hūṇa chiefs over the northwestern part of the subcontinent was certainly essential. In the mountains, moreover, the Hūṇa, appearing in different political constellations as Chionites or Hephthalites, had a more permanent role.

I concluded that the profusion of graffiti in the Sogdian script and language found in the precincts of relatively isolated sites (Shatial, Thor North, Dadam Das) were indications of trading posts, i.e., places where imports from the north were bartered for goods brought by Buddhist merchants from the south. This interpretation seems to be accepted: there is hardly an alternative. But I am sure that the long journey of the caravans from Sogdia to the heart of the mountains needed some form of safe conduct or protection by a strong power. According to the dates proposed by Sims-Williams, this protection must have been provided by Chionite tribes integrated within the Hephthalite state.[25]

In the graffiti discovered in the Indus valley, the ethnic designation xwn = Hun appears as a personal name (or part of such a name)

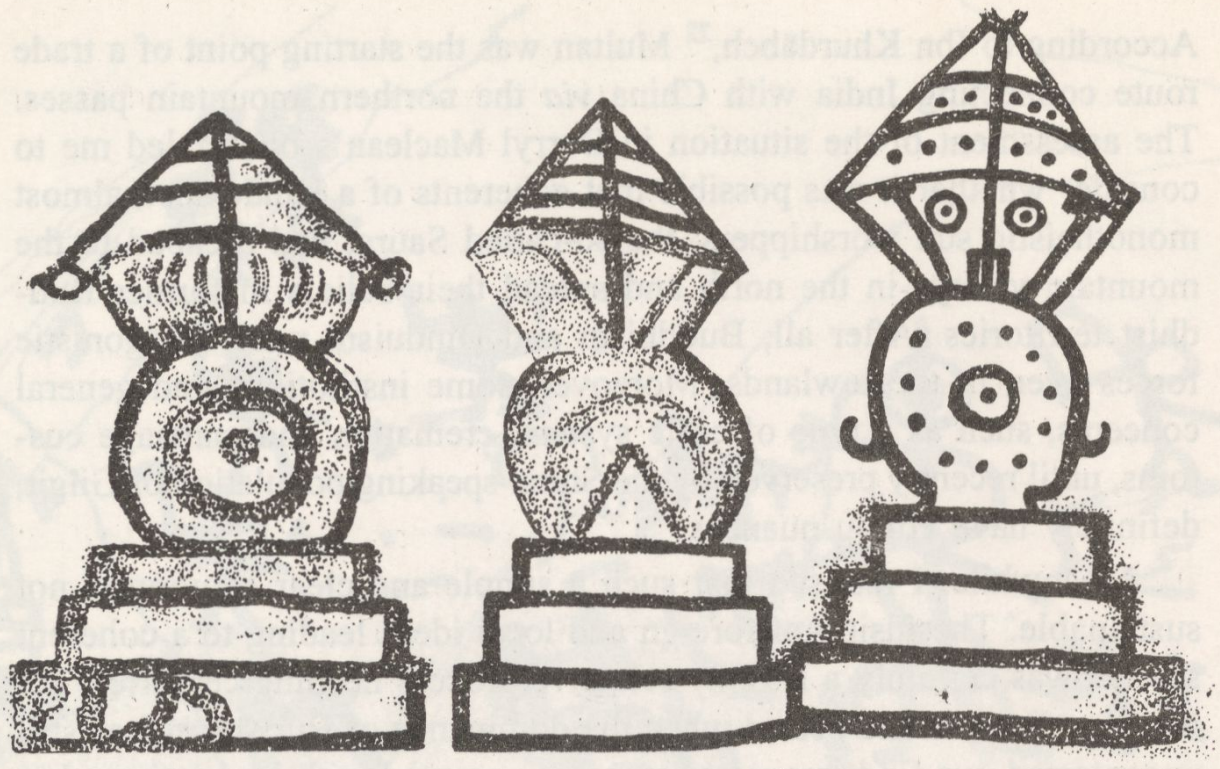

Figure 3. Petroglyphs showing three heliocentric stupas, made in the time when Buddhism was still dominant in the Indus valley. That is evident from the peculiar rendering of the umbrellas. Site at the mouth of the Gichi-gah, west of Chilas.

surprisingly often. In the glossary prepared by Sims-Williams, 15 cases are mentioned. This is not unexpected since the name is also attested "passim in the Mug documents". Was this choice of name influenced by the heroic ambitions of the great Sogdian families, as expressed by other names as well, and reflected in wall paintings in the assembly halls and chapels of the great private houses? Certainly, reference to a people who ruled the eastern part of the steppes and who afterwards brought so many statelets in Central Asia under its sway would be quite reasonable. The incorporation of Sogdiana into the realm of the Hephthalites took place between A.D. 477 and A.D. 479, according to Enoki, and apparently had no negative effects on the self-esteem or economy of the sedentary population. However, not all inscriptions can be safely considered to postdate this event. Should we perhaps speak of an anticipating sympathy, a feeling of being from the same stock, that persisted from the time when the actual allies were the Chionite tribes? That would confirm both Enoki's view that the Huns spoke an Iranian language and also the hypothesis resulting from Bailey's linguistic interpretation: namely that the Huns, under the name Hyaona, were one of the Iranian tribes in the southern part of Central Asia before they moved

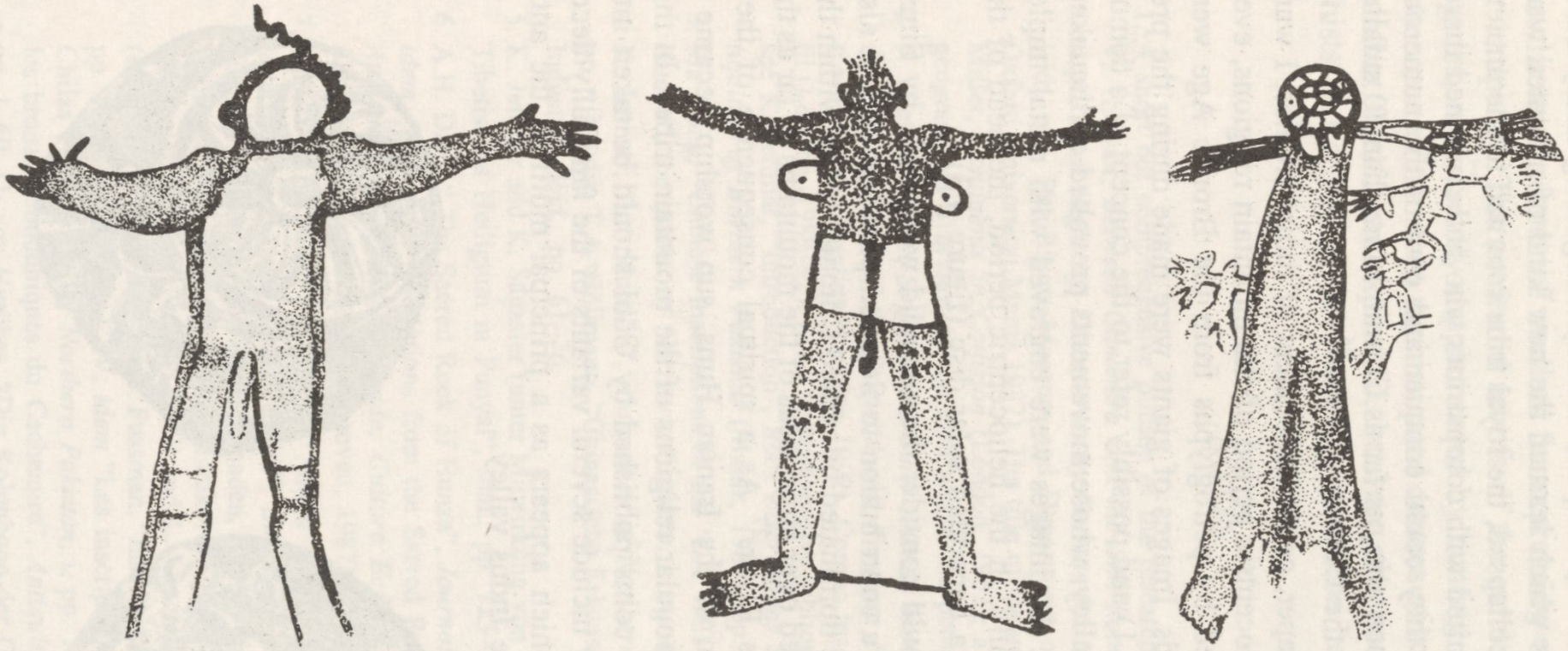

Figure 4.1–3. Transformation of a local motif ("giant" with extended arms) that appears in the Indus valley from the Bronze Age onwards:

1. Earliest shape (Bronze age?) from the site Dadam Das, on the right bank of the Indus, opposite Chilas.
2. Elaborate rendering during the Buddhist period (near the Karakorum Highway, west of Chilas). The breasts and fetter are later additions.
3. Tranformation into the style of the sun-worshippers. The head is rendered as a solar rosette; additional figures with large hands are visible under the protecting arms.

to the east and founded their empire, thereby integrating many other ethnic and racial groups which learned the new kind of mounted warfare. When the empire collapsed, the royal tribe returned to the ancient homeland where they united with compatriots who had remained there. That may explain how they could conquer and control the numerous countries in the high mountains, as far as Chitral. More than 30 smaller states are mentioned in the Chinese reports.[26]

At the end of this paper, or announcement of future studies, I want to stress that in the heliocentric period of the mountain religions, even archaic concepts attested by petroglyphs from the Bronze Age were adapted to the new needs. Images of giants were made during the prehistoric period (figure 4.1) and possibly refer to the concept of a demon within the core of the valley, whose movements provoked earthquakes. In the Buddhist period, the images were engraved with metal implements (figure 4.2). Finally, in the heliocentric period, the head of the figure was replaced by a decorated solar disc (figure 4.3).

In any case, we should consider the splendid work done by Sims-Williams not simply as a contribution to Sogdian philology, for it also indicates that the sphere dominated by united Chionite tribes within the Hephthalite state extended over large areas of the mountains as far as the right bank of the Indus River.[27] As a spiritual consequence of their inclusion into the realm of the Iranian Huns, sun worship became a dominant factor in the popular religions of the mountain tribes. In this context the Hephthalite coins published by Göbl should be taken into consideration,[28] for they include several variants of the fancifully decorated disc (figure 5) which appears as a principal motif in the anti-Buddhist rock art of the Indus valley.

Figure 5. Coin of the Iranian Huns; solar symbol (whirl) on the reverse (After Göbl, Dokumente zur Geschichte der iranischen Hunnen, vol. iii, pl. 38).

In most of the territories dominated by the Huns, petroglyphs were not the usual respected medium for expressing either religious affiliation or antipathy. The preferred motifs of the rural population were animal figures, occasionally supplemented by hunting and fighting scenes. But when one of the main sophisticated centres of rock art was involved, the conflict itself was expressed, between the previously dominant Buddhists and opposing devotees of a pantheon headed by a solar deity.

NOTES

1. A short but comprehensive outline of the research is found in K. Jettmar and V. Thewalt, *Between Gandhāra and the Silk Roads: Rock-carvings along the Karakorum Highway, Discoveries by German-Pakistani Expeditions 1979–1984* (exh. cat., Pitt Rivers Museum and Department of Ethnology and Prehistory, Oxford University; Mainz 1987). The title of the present study is taken from K. Miller, *Continents in Collision* (London, 1982), a book which offers the best geographical overview of the area where the petroglyphs are located.
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3. Ma Yong, "Chinese Inscriptions of the 'DA WEI', Envoy of the Sacred Rock Hunza", *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, i, pp. 139–57.
4. K. Jettmar, "Introduction", *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, ii (Mainz 1993), pp. vii–xviii; T.A. Höllmann, "Chinesische Felsinschriften aus dem Hunza- und Industal", *ibid.*, pp. 61–76.
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zur Indologie und Iranistik: Festschrift Paul Thieme, H. 5/6, (Reinbek, 1980), pp. 49–82; *idem*, "Zu einigen Felsinschriften in Brähmï aus Nordpakistan" *Ethnologie und Geschichte*, pp. 272–79; *idem* "Zu einigen iranischen Namen und Titeln aus Brähmï-Inschriften am oberen Indus", *Studia Grammatica Iranica: Festschrift für H. Humbach* (Munich, 1986), pp. 147–62; *idem* "The Paṭola Ṣähīs of Gilgit—A Forgotten Dynasty", *Journal of Oriental Institute*, 36 (1987), pp. 221–29; *idem*, "Buddhistische Inschriften aus dem Tal des Oberen Indus", *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, i, pp. 73–106; L. Sander, "Einige neue Aspekte zur Entwicklung der Brähmï in Gilgit und Bamiyan (ca. 2.–7. Jh. n. Chr.)", *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien* (Wiesbaden, 1989), pp. 113–24; *idem*, "Remarks on the Formal Brähmï of Gilgit, Bāmiyān and Khotan", *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, i, pp. 107–37; *idem*, "The Earliest Manuscripts from Central Asia and the Sarvāstivāda Mission", *Corolla Iranica: Papers in Honour of Professor Dr. David Neil Mackenzie's 65th Birthday* (Frankfurt/Main, Bern, New York and Paris, 1991), pp. 133–49.

8. K. Jettmar, *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, i, pp. xi–lvii; *idem* "Sogdians in the Indus Valley", *Histoire et Cultes de l'Asie Centrale Préislamique* (Paris, 1991), pp. 251–53.
9. K. Jettmar, "Petroglyphs and Early History of the Upper Indus Valley: The 1981 Expedition, A Preliminary Report", *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 16 (1982), pp. 293–308; *idem, Tierstil am Indus: Kulturhistorische Problems Südasiens und Zentralasiens, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge* (Halle/Saale, 1984/25 I 25), pp. 73–93.
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13. K. Jettmar, "The Paṭolas, their Governors and their Successors", *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*, ii, pp. 77–122. The exact location of Shamil (Shamīlān) was already identified by J. Markwart, *Wehrot und Arang: Untersuchungen zur mythischen und geschichtlichen Landeskunde von Ostiran* (Leiden, 1938), p. 104.
14. K. Jettmar, "The Art of the Northern Nomads in the Upper Indus Valley", *South Asian Studies*, 7 (1991), pp. 1–20.
15. K. Jettmar, "Felsbilder am Indus: die nachbuddhistische Periode", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 28/3–4 (1984), pp. 176–219.
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