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Sogdians in the Indus valley

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In 1985, Dr Sims-Williams joined the small German team working in the Indus valley west of the Nanga Parbat, between the villages Chilas and Shatial. During and after this campaign he studied no fewer than 610 Middle Iranian inscriptions. They are all in the Indus valley, apart from a small group discovered near Hunza. "About ten are in Bactrian, two Middle Persian, the rest Sogdian" — so is the summarization of his conclusions.

For Dr Sims-Williams (1989 : 135) the result of his studies is basically a "corpus of Sogdian names large enough to be regarded as a typical cross-section — at least, of names used by males of a particular social group" — almost certainly merchant-venturers who led their caravans in one of the most forbidding regions in Asia. Many names show the travellers' heroic ambitions. Theophoric names are very frequent as well. So we can see which divinities were venerated in the Sogdian territories during the time when the inscriptions in the Indus valley were made. They "seem most likely to belong to the fourth to sixth centuries A.D., or to some part of that period" (Sims-Williams 1989 : 134). This allows us to take a look at the religious situation during an otherwise badly documented period. The discoveries of our Soviet colleagues in the Sogdian towns mainly refer to a later time : between the 7th and the early 8th century A.D. (Azarpay 1981 : 81-158).

For me the most important matter of concern is the fact that 560 of all Middle Iranian inscriptions, i.e., more than 90 % were found in one site alone : Shatial Bridge.

A modern bridge near the village Shatial was used for naming the site. This bridge links the Karakorum Highway running on the southern bank of the Indus with two diverging jeep-roads on the opposite northern bank, leading into the adjoining valleys Tangir or Darel.

Approximately 50 Sogdian rock-inscriptions were observed in all the other sites along the Indus including those at Hunza. Even in these we observe a strange concentration : more than 20 inscriptions were found in the site Thor North, and almost the same number was counted not far away, at Oshibat. Fewer than a dozen have a very diffuse distribution, mostly around the township of Chilas. But that is not the only oddity.

The site Shatial Bridge has a large extension : So far, inscriptions were observed on the southern bank of the Indus following the course for approximately two kilometres. The distance from the riverside hardly exceeds 300 metres. Almost everywhere in this belt carvings of Buddhist stūpas occur. The pertinent Buddhist inscriptions were studied and, in part, published by O.v. Hinüber. Some may belong to the 7th century or even to the 8th century A.D. — According to v. Hinüber others are much earlier, perhaps starting in the 4th century A.D. (During the campaign of 1985, I saw some bruising on the opposite bank, east of the mouth of the Darel river, along the old path to a place near Harban where the Indus could formerly be crossed by a ferry, a large wooden boat which could even take horses aboard. But these petroglyphs are quite different, rather resembling those in the upper Gilgit valley).

The greatest density was observed west of the present bridge. Excellent works of Buddhist art located here have already been published, e.g. the representation of the Śibi-Jātaka and “pagodas” with adorants, maybe created under Chinese influence (Jettmar/Thewalt 1987 : 22-23, pl. 19). Chinese and Bactrian inscriptions occur. One inscription — maybe Kharoṣṭhī — remains enigmatic.

And here in an area decorated by other visitors as well who used the Brāhmī script the largest cluster of the Sogdian inscriptions is situated, hardly larger than 2 500 square metres — just like a polo ground. There are two minor related groups nearby, practically between the bridge and the main concentration (fig. 1).

Is the “largest cluster” indicating the location of a sanctuary, the holy precinct attracting pilgrims from far and wide ? If so we must explain why the Buddhists made engravings and bruising over such a large area. The Sogdians on the other hand preferred a concentration in a very restricted compound. Why were the adherents of the Sogdian pantheon not willing or not allowed to write down their names, i.e., to reveal and to attest their identity beyond a neatly defined boundary line ? (fig. 3).

I would like to suggest the following explanation :

The Sogdians were traders, who had arrived from the north via Tangir or Darel. They were allowed to cross the Indus. They were permitted to camp near to the banks, and were protected in respect of their religious activities, but they could not move around, and had to keep within narrow boundaries. This was the normal end of their journey. Perhaps it was not necessary to go further, because near the place now called Shatial Bridge there may have been a trade centre where the Sogdians coming from the north had the chance to meet their partners arriving from Kashmir or from the lowlands of Gandhāra. I submit the assumption that the area around Shatial had a similar function as e.g. the fortress of Rajawari which was considered by Bīrūnī as the “northern frontier of India”. “It is the farthest place to which our merchants trade, and beyond which they will never pass” (Sachau 1888/1962, vol. I : 278).

One of the Chinese inscriptions near Shatial Bridge (deciphered but still unpublished) somewhat cryptically speaking about a “boundary” (or a pass) may become important in this respect. Even more relevant is the text of one inscription deciphered by Dr Sims-Williams (1989 : 133) : “I, Nanēvandak, (son of) Narisaf, have come on (the) ten(th day) (?) and (have) begged (as) a boon from the spirit of the sacred place, Krt, that... I may arrive (home) more quickly and may see (my) brother in good (health) with joy”.

If the contacts at the emporium were so well regulated then we must assume the existence of a controlling authority with an armed guard at hands, providing protection for the merchants but also participating in their profits by imposing duty on the trade-goods.

Since 1983 I have been convinced that I know where this “administrative unit” was situated :

East of the bridge, but on a higher level, just below the Karakorum Highway, there was a camp of the woodcontractors mercilessly destroying the wonderful forests in the valleys Tangir and Darel. In this area there is a spur with rock faces on three sides. When I explored it under the suspicious eyes of the woodcutters, I called the place “Shatial fort” in a sort of hopeful anticipation.

A closer examination was undertaken by Dr Thewalt in 1987 (figs. 4-5). The remains of walls built up with regular or well-cut stones were observed and explained by him as remains of stūpas based on quadrangular fundaments. This identification communicated to the police and the local administration, did not hinder the woodcontractors from destroying the visible ruins during the following winter, in order to get rid of nasty archaeologists. This is most regrettable even if I am not prepared to accept the proposed interpretation. My understanding of the situation is different : I think that the designation “Shatial Fort” is correct. There are some Buddhist rock-carvings in this place, too, but they are not the typical decoration. Perhaps they were later additions.

I consider the area on the southern bank of the Indus (with a camp-site nearby, a holy precinct and a dominating stronghold) as a sort of “bridgehead”, occupied by the power which protected the merchants during their long journey from Sogdia, via Eastern Tokharistan or skirting the Pamirs, crossing the Hindukush and finally leading down to the Indus. Whether there was actually a bridge nearby — and not only a ferry — is an open question (fig. 2).

However, many questions remain to be answered in the future :

1) If the site Shatial Bridge was the location of a sort of trade fair — who were the partners of the Sogdians coming from the south ?

Inscriptions in Brāhmī, approximately contemporary with those of the Sogdians, were studied by O.v. Hinüber. He observed Iranian names. Some of them indicate that their bearers were of Saka origin. Others reveal an affiliation to the tribal population of North-West India and Pakistan who went through a period of re-arrangement after the decline of central Kushān power.

The name of the Jats is mentioned twice. In any case these southern counterparts were not homogenous — different in this respect from the Sogdians.

Some of the southern visitors were worshippers of Hinduistic deities, but the general background was Buddhist. That means a marked difference to the majority of the Sogdians. Several observations point to mutual animosity.

2) Maybe the protecting power for the traders from the north were the Hephthalites, but that can only be proved by a more exact dating of the inscriptions. As for the southern counterparts, they were perhaps supported — but hardly ruled — by the Dāradas. The name of a Maharāja of the Dāradas is found in a royal inscription near Chilas.

3) What are the economic and social implications of the Sogdian inscriptions discovered in the minor clusters at Thor North and at Oshibat? Maybe they belonged to an alternative route further to the east, not as strictly controlled, where the Sogdians could enter otherwise forbidden territory. It was precisely in these places where they expressed their sentiments in a sort of joking relationship.

Many questions remain open, but one conclusion is evident: We know that Sogdian iconography was strongly influenced by Indian prototypes in the 7th and 8th century A.D. The basis must have been earlier contacts, trade routes already existing in the 5th and 6th century. One of these routes has now become visible in a rather gloomy and desert-like part of the Indus valley (Azarpay *et al.*, 1981 : esp. 26-50).

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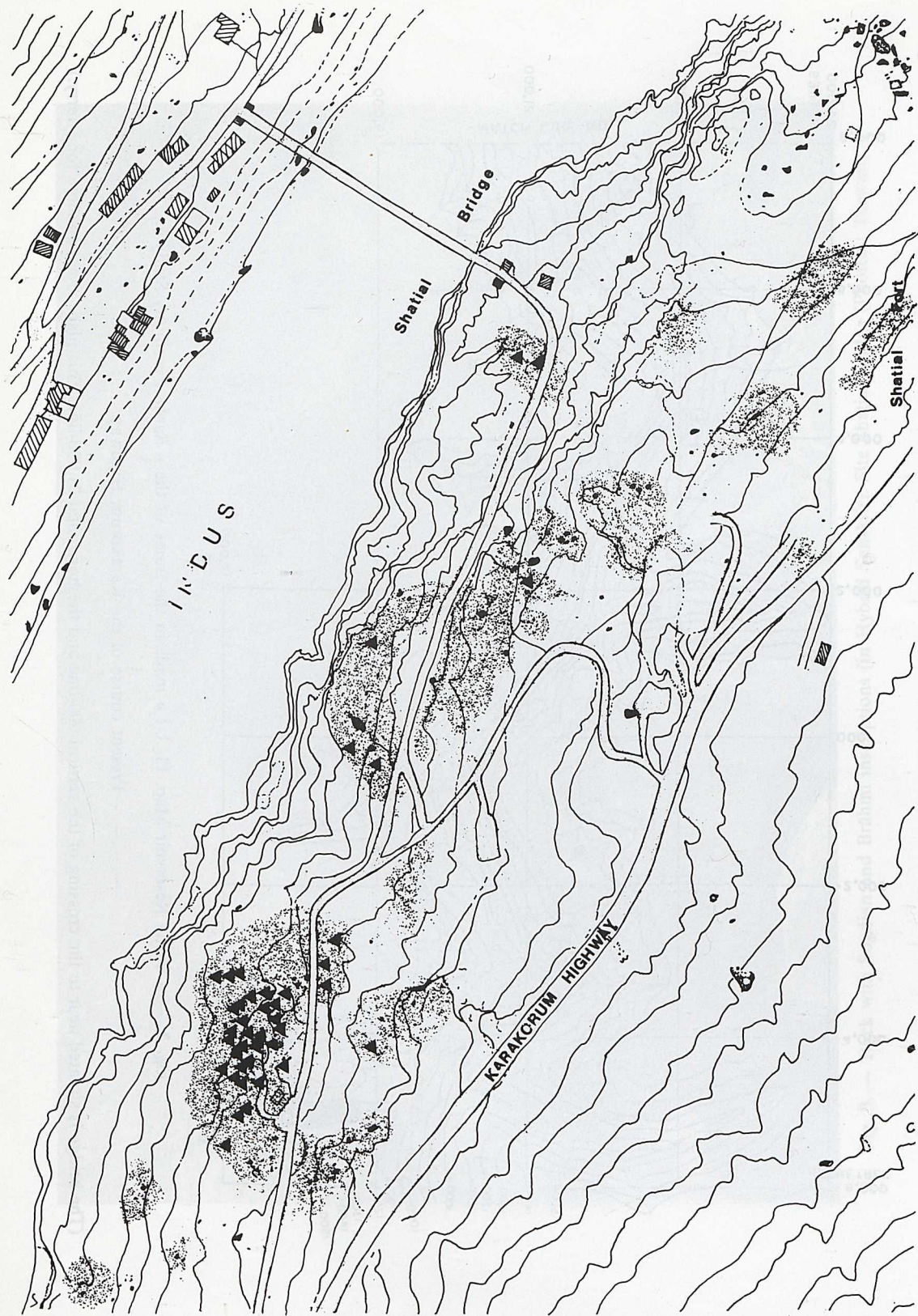


Fig. 1. — Shatial Bridge and the clusters of petroglyphs. In these clusters indicated by dotted areas, the rocks where Sogdian inscriptions are located are marked by triangles.

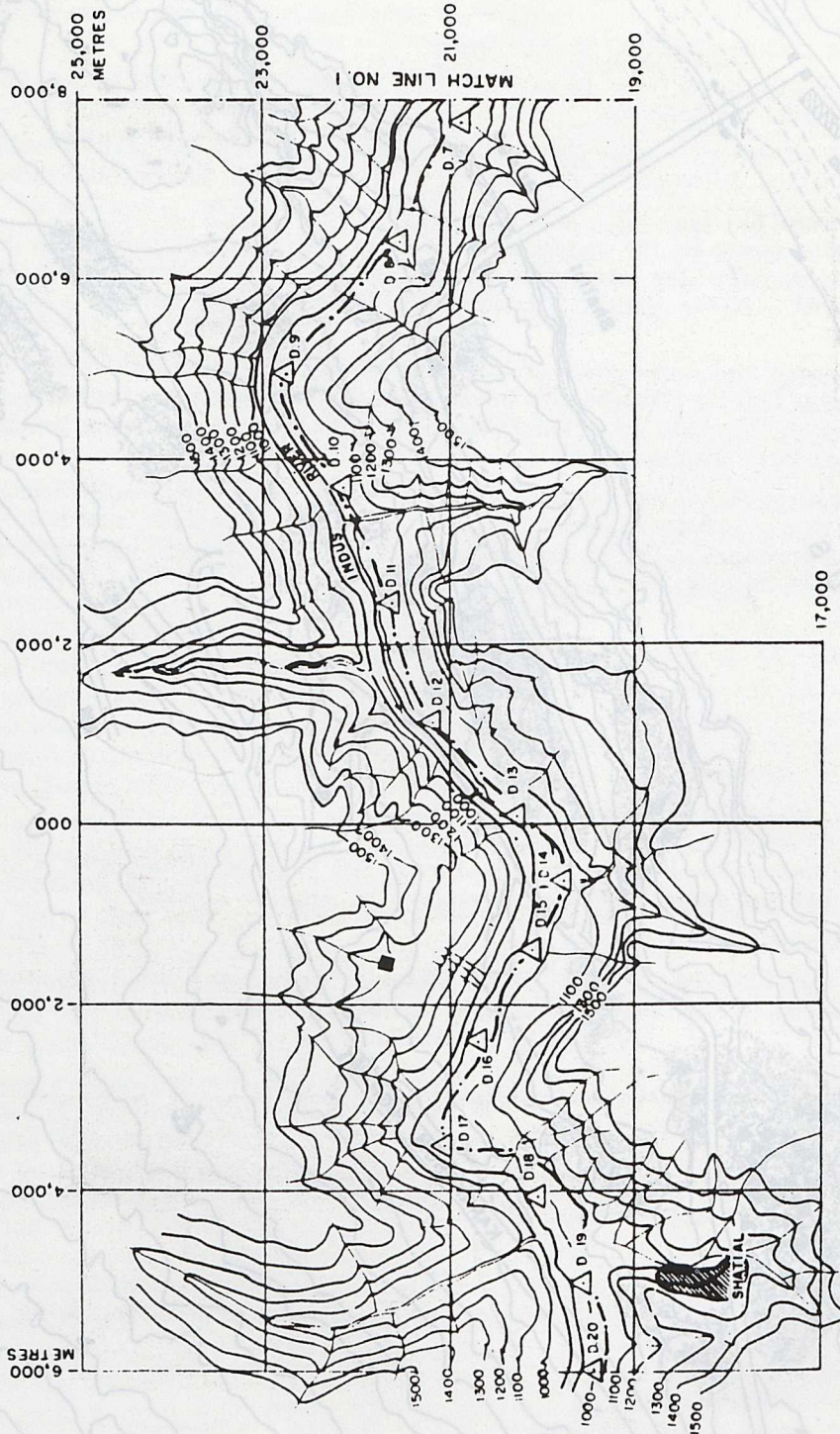


Fig. 2. — « Basha Reservoir Map, Pl. 1-1 » made in the frame of the « Basha Feasibility Study ».

--- Present course of the Karakorom Highway.

(The bridge is situated near to the crossing of the vertical 000-line and the horizontal 21.000-line. This place is not suitable for a ferry.)

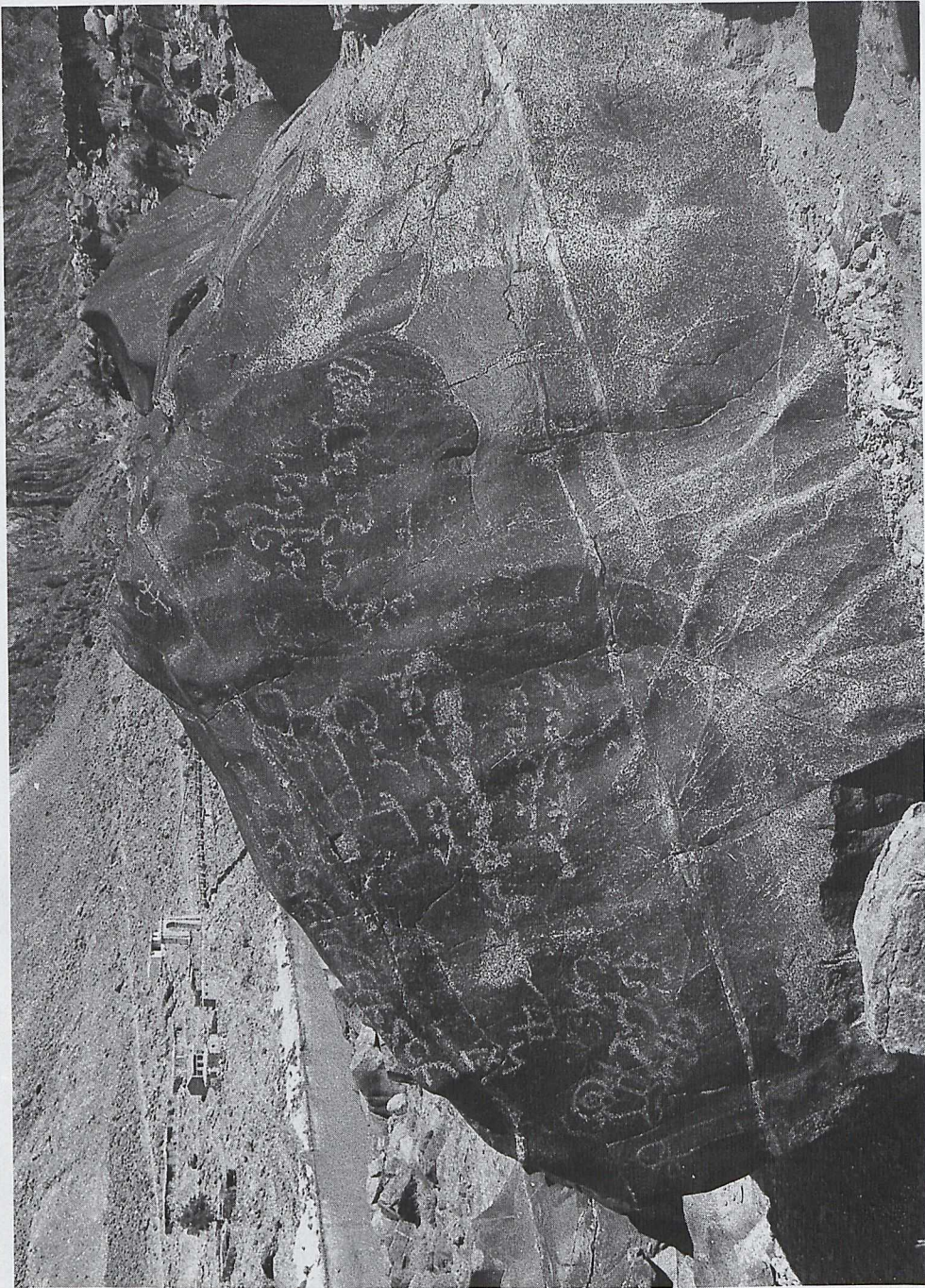


Fig. 3. — Rock with Sogdian and Brāhmī inscriptions (in Hybrid Sanskrit). Site Shatial Bridge (Photos : Thewalt).



Fig. 4. — The place called « Shatial Fort » in the foreground; to the right the bridge and the jeep-road to Tangir are visible.



Fig. 5. — Shatial Fort, masonry still in the Gandhāra-tradition.