

**Majallah-e-Tahqiq**

Research Journal of

the Faculty of Oriental Learning

Vol: 39, Sr.No.111, 2018, pp 03 – 14

مجله تحقیق

کلیه علوم شرقیه

جلد 39 اپریل - جون 2018

شماره 111

## **The Pre-Historic Petroglyphs of Silk Route: Shatial to Khunjerab Pass**

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### **Abstract:**

The rocky surfaces along the Karakoram Highway in the northern areas of Pakistan has gained popularity in the annals of history in the past 40 years. The surfaces are host to a myriad collection of petroglyphs ranging from prehistoric times to the rise of Buddhism in the region. Since the Karakoram highway traces the same region which the ancient silk route traversed, the influences from Iran, Central Asia, India and China make the rock carvings and inscriptions an enigma to be explored. The petroglyphs, due to their subject matter, invite us to explore and understand the dynamic of respective communities and their cultures and serve as a historical record reflecting the primitive interests of human beings. This paper describes some of the findings in relation to prehistoric petroglyphs of the region and their corresponding culture, particularly from Shatial to Khunjerab, in the light of discoveries made by experts of the field. It extends the findings by relating them to an evolutionary perspective that takes into account the transition of a hunter-gatherer community to a pastoral way of living.

### **Introduction**

The need to express and communicate has been one of the primordial features of human psyche. Throughout history, we

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we witness ample evidence, wherein, man expressed himself using three principal modes of communication, i.e. verbal, gestural and graphic. The first two modes required a real-time communication since they demanded an instant audience or viewership, however, the third mode broke the barriers of immediate time and space. It became a carrier of the ideas, values and choices of individuals, communities and even civilizations. It thrived through rock surfaces, which the ancient man found as a useful and dependable medium for emplacing an impression and preserving it. Whether the impressions (ranging from undecipherable marks to full-fledged figural representations), were meant for the living people or generations to come, has been a matter of necessity and implication. We are not quite clear about the nature of necessities, but in terms of implication, the markings on rocks, be they engraved, painted or sculpted, authenticate and document their respective cultures. According to Heyd, 'the extant corpus of humanly-made markings on rock is an extraordinary testimony of peoples' cares, interests and capacities, preserved'. (Heyd 2003) In the light of relevant historical sources and evidence, the rock surfaces provide us a window to a subject matter that was significant for ancient man and hence help us becoming definitive about their cultural inclinations. The following account is an attempt in becoming definitive. It focuses on the prehistoric petroglyphs of Silk Route, particularly in the northern areas of Pakistan (figure 1), and seeks through them, an understanding of their respective cultures.

### **The Silk Route**

The Silk Route refers to a crisscross network of routes that connected Asia and Europe. It extended 4000 miles connecting the city of Xian in China to Constantinople in Turkey (Olimat 2013, 6). The most significant aspect of this route, which is more relevant to the present study is its role as a carrier of culture. The archeological findings spread across the route suggest that the region hosted a horde of cultures that left indelible marks. Harald Hauptmann suggests that before the engagement of China as a trading enterprise, three main cultural movements that enriched the region, 1) Greek, 2) Indian, 3) Iran (Bianca 2005, 21). All these

cultural streams intersected in the region, which is now called the northern areas of Pakistan. Due to this cultural influx, the outlets of the main silk route that traversed through Pakistan particularly in regions encircling Taxila, Peshawar, Swat and Gilgit, remained active and the local populace absorbed various currents of the cultural movements.

The link between the main silk route and Indian Subcontinent marked the passage, which is now called the Karakoram Highway.<sup>1</sup> This road, mapping major segments of the old silk route, starts in the region of Taxila and passes through Hazara, Kohistan, Besham, Chilas, Gilgit, Hunza and enters China via Khunjerab Pass. The archeological evidence carrying the enigmatic petroglyphs and inscriptions is spread all over the route. These range from rudimentary sketching to figural representations of religious icons. With the opening of the Karakoram Highway in 1979, a whole world of archeological evidence unfolded before experts of the field.

### **The Subject Matter of Petroglyphs and their Respective Culture**

The first systematic study of the petroglyphs and inscriptions in Northern areas of Pakistan was carried out by a Pak-German collaboration in the 1980s. Until recently, there are more than 30000 figural drawings and 5000 inscriptions, which have been discovered and explored (Samad 2011). The petroglyphs were identified at the beginning of twentieth century but their contextual analyses were conducted by Prof. Karl Jettmar and Prof. Ahmad Hasan Dani (Ahmed 2014, 422). The petroglyphs have been found in varying degrees of concentration along the Karakoram Highway. Depending upon geographical conditions and settlements, they grow in number between Shatial and Chilas, and then at the confluences of the rivers and alongside the valleys including Yasin, Ghizer and Hunza on one hand and Skardu on the other (Dani 1989, 91). The greater concentration along the either side of Indus becomes explainable with the fact that the nomadic

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<sup>1</sup> The construction of the road was started in 1959 under a collaboration between Pakistan and China and was completed in 1979.

tribes temporarily settled there whenever the crossing of the river became difficult, particularly during flood (Neelis 2010, 262).

Dr. Dani has described the petroglyphs in Chilas in a chronological order. The earliest of the petroglyphs depict hunter-gatherer communities. They used stone tools and stone-tipped arrows for hunting in both individual and group endeavors (figure 2 and 3). These petroglyphs are found in various concentrations from Skardu to Yasin Valley with Chilas being the mid-point. He dates these petroglyphs between sixth to 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. The second group has been placed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC and it represents figural renderings of demi-gods (figure 4), livestock and herd rearing.

The above petroglyphs, according to him, reflect pastoral communities. The renderings on the sacred rock of Hunza, and the first appearance of stupas in Chilas, have been placed in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC leading to the fourth group of petroglyphs, wherein, a full-fledged depiction of Buddhist culture and communities becomes noticeable with several figural renderings of the Buddha and stupas (figure 5).

Dr. Dani has assigned the above chronological order on the basis of the techniques deployed in engraving. In order of their invention and application, he identifies three distinct techniques, 1) Pecking, 2) Outline (figure 6), and 3) Synthesis of first two techniques. He refers to a collection of petroglyphs in Chilas at the 'Deva' site, wherein, hunting scenes are depicted. The bodies of animals are bitriangular and shown through pecking. These also include depiction of family scenes represented using same technique of pecking. These petroglyphs, Dani claims, are a graphic representation of hunter-gatherer communities; these communities learned to live a group life in which men and women played a cooperative role. The absence of domesticated animals in these petroglyphs also supports the assertion that these petroglyphs belong to pre-pastoral communities (Dani 1989, 93–96). He supports this claim by archeological evidence in which various Mesolithic tools were found from the region dating these communities to have lived between 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC (Dani 1983, 18).

The petroglyphs at Thalpan Ziarat include imagery of driving animals into a big circle. This imagery indicates the domestication of animals. The rendering is also improved as an outline along with pecking is used to depict animal bodies. On the same site men are shown dancing together, which implies a greater social cohesion with leisure activities (figure 7).

Dani mentions that the technique of representing human figures also evolved as their bodies are shown in terms of triangles and circles. This treatment is strikingly similar to what we find in the caves of Bhimbetka in the cave paintings dating back to 7000 BC (figure 8). This needs to be explored that whether the influence came from India?

A further evidence of pastoral communities is found at the site Chilas III, where herds of sheep driven by men are clearly visible. The appearance of bigger human figures with snake twisting on arms represent the third pre-historic phase, when rituals and conception of deities started appearing in petroglyphs (Dani 1989, 98–101).

Prof. Karl Jettmar has used a different method for dating of the pre-historic petroglyphs. He has classified the petroglyphs through their extent of repatination. According to Jettmar, the fully repatinated images are certainly prehistoric since the rocks in the Indus region require at least four millennia for complete repatination. The semi-repatinated petroglyphs may belong to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. Jettmar proposed that fully repatinated petroglyphs are found between Shatial and Chilas as the area is home to clusters of fully patinated rocks forming enclosures suitable for creating petroglyphs (Jettmar et al. 1989, XVI). Jettmar has also used spatial archeology in order to understand the meanings and significance of the petroglyphs.

Using repatination and spatial archeology, Jettmar makes a significant observation concerning the region of Thalpan Ziayarat and Thor. He states that the petroglyphs in these areas are repatinated and are pre-historic. Interestingly, as he mentions, the human and animal figures depicted in the petroglyphs of these area are explicitly males. He infers that this represents a cultural trait of

the pre-historic communities; the men were considered superior due to their involvement in hunting on the higher grounds. The females were considered inferior and their lives were limited to lower grounds. He believes that these sites represent the sanctuaries, wherein people from different valleys gathered for festivities (Jettmar et al. 1989, XXIII).

Jettmar, on the basis of his analysis of anthropomorphic figures represented in petroglyphs and the horned head of the hunters also speculates an association of local cultures with those of Central Asia, particularly Okunoid culture, in the second millennium BC (Jettmar 1982, 302). This is supported by the images of masks found in the region (figure 9).

He also mentions that during the pre-historic phase, there was an Indian influence as well supported by the pagan motifs (Jettmar et al. 1989, XXIV). Moreover, there are semi-patinated petroglyphs in the region, which were made by a group that came from Iran, while the animal style came with Nomads from the Steppes in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (Jettmar et al. 1989, XVIII). The Iranian influence is visible in the mythical horse which is decorated and signified through a reserved background (figure 10) (Ardeleanu-Jansen et al. 1997, 38). The horse chariot discovered in the region of Thor has also been related to Indo-Iranian people (Kuzmina 2007, 114). The various characters of prehistoric petroglyphs are presented by Hauptmann in drawings (figure 11).

### Understanding the Prehistoric Mind

The findings of Dani and Jettmar present a picture in which the Indus region is shown to have connected with Central Asia, Iran, India and China even in the pre-historic period of the region. A more definite evidence came from Burzahom in Kashmir (Allchin and Allchin 1968, 160) and Loebnar in Swat (Sv and V 2014, 65). This means that the minor silk route located in the northern areas of Pakistan played a significant role in prehistoric period.

The findings also show that in the earliest prehistoric petroglyphs, the hand and animal motifs occupy the center stage (figure 12). The animals which are mostly depicted are wild such as ibex and markhor. Human beings are less frequent, they are shown hunting

the wild animals with bow, arrow and sometimes stones. The sheep herds are not very frequent however, the sites containing them also depict images where groups of human beings are shown participating in leisure activities. Hauptman noted that ‘thirty representations of male anthropomorphic figures with extended arms take a prominent position in the prehistoric engravings ...perhaps they portray demons, deities or giants that held an important place in the beliefs of prehistoric man’(Ardeleanu-Jansen et al. 1997, 36).

In terms of subject matter, we are given at least five principal themes; 1) a frequent and continuous presence of hand motif, 2) the hunting scenes, 3) herds of domesticated animals, 4) leisure activities, and 5) anthropomorphic figures. We may assume that the prehistoric period of this region shows a transition from hunter-gatherer community to a pastoral community, which later on seems to have developed religious inclinations. This transition occurred in the wake of influences coming from Central Asia, Iran and India in a period of spanning over four millennia. The transition can be justified through the influences of foreigners on local population but there is another perspective that can be taken into account.

In *Origins of the Human Mind*, Merlin Donald proposes that the human line of decent over two million years went through three major transitions, i.e. 1) freeing of hands that made the inventions of tools possible, 2) emergence of language, 3) invention of symbolic and notational systems. (Donald 1991)

Probably, the frequent presence of hand motif is reminiscent of the importance of hands that man realized in developing tools. The importance of hands can also be seen from another perspective. It can be an expression of a rudimentary form of self-awareness. This claim is supported by the fact that the hand impressions have been a universal theme in prehistoric art whether found in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe or America (Grace 2013, 346). The motif is clearly visible in the cave at Perch-Marle in France (figure 13) and abundantly in the Cave of Hands in Argentine (figure 14) comparable to what we find in Ziarat II (figure 15).

The hands for the prehistoric man, must have been an expression of individual identity. This position becomes more plausible in the light of the fact that the emergence of language was also the emergence of a capability of abstraction and reflective thinking. Man became able to conceptualize his existence beyond sense experience and was able to develop a concept of self, a necessary pre-requisite for social relations and consequently collective culture (Megarry 1995, 115).

The depiction of wild animals in the petroglyphs of Indus region can probably related to another current in the history of prehistoric mindset. It was perhaps an attempt to control them. It has been speculated that the depictions of animals in the cave art of the world belonging to Paleolithic age was an attempt in practices of magic. It was thought that by making an image, man would be able to overcome their power (Kleiner 2013, 19). In case of representation of the Indus region, this seems far-fetched. Unlike, the European cave paintings, where we find a developed realistic rendering of animal form, the petroglyphs represent animals only in hunting scenes. Their controlling through image making must have demanded an imitation par excellence as observable in the cave of Lascaux, France (figure 16).

The depiction of animals in the Indus region is probably for instructional purposes; the images were used to teach the younger generation the art of hunting. It might also be possible that the act of hunting was thought as the noblest since it was an act that procured food and ensured survival. This position seems more appropriate since we do not find a focus on depicting the identities of hunters and the hunted per se but a greater focus is on representing the process. The hunting scenes are well preserved in the caves of Bhimbetka

The transition from a hunter-gatherer community to a pastoral one also had its influence on the cognitive and emotional development of man. This transition meant a change in consumption of food. The domestication of animals gave the chance to postpone consumption. For the hunter-gatherer community, the hunt served the need in an immediate way but in the pastoral way of life, securing a future regarding consumption of food became possible.



This actually meant that man moved from biological survival to the culture of mental well-being. This transition also had another consequence; the hunter-gatherer community was territorial but the pastoral community had a greater chance of mobility (Cribb 2004, 21). The pastoral community could move with its pastoral capital to new grazing grounds, which meant a greater possibility of interaction and cultural awareness. The interaction was much more necessary since the pastoral way of life demanded a totally new learning that was involved in animal husbandry. The settlements in the valleys of Indus regions were certainly a result of seeking greener pastures and a greater cohesion and corporation, resulting into ceremonies and festivals.

The freedom from serving the food consumption needs on day-to-day basis to a mode where in the form of livestock, the food was secured for immediate future, the pastoral communities found leisure time. The mind became freer from immediate survival agenda and it could now more concentrate on bigger questions of life. This freedom would have become the basis for developing macro-perspectives on life in which religion found its place. The advent of notational systems, symbolic language, would have helped the individuals to preserve and communicate ideas about the intangible world of the soul seeking a greater self-awareness. The anthropomorphic figures probably belong to this kind of spiritual seeking. Berghaus mentions the importance of caves in prehistoric time period, he mentions that as a 'cultural reservoir, the cave was a place where myths were generated and recorded... It was a place where initiated men returned to receive higher a degree of esoteric knowledge and expertise' (Berghaus 2004, 132). The rock surfaces spread along the Karakoram highway served for the hunter-gatherer communities and pastoral settlements as places much like caves, particularly for the pastoral communities, who had a major part of their lives spent in the open. They recorded on the rock surfaces whatever became significant in their lives and centered their ceremonies and religious activities around it.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan can be seen in a similar bond with the Indus river as Egypt has with Nile. The Indus river running across the country

has given the region an air of cooperation, fertility and prosperity. The upper Indus region in the northern areas of Pakistan being a crossroad of civilizations from India, China, Central Asia and Iran has enriched the culture of the land in multiple ways. The prehistoric petroglyphs, which occupy only the five percent of the total number of rock carvings discovered in the region give us a faint but encouraging idea that how this region was a crucible of influences coming from the adjacent communities that travelled through the silk route. The style of rock carvings, later on developed these influences giving us a detailed documentation of the Buddhist culture in the region, integrating Gandhara, India and China into a historical interface of ideas and culture. The speculations that can be made by looking at the petroglyphs are nothing more than a guess work. They cast light on a much quicker cultural transition from hunter-gatherer communities to pastoral settlements as compared to the rest of the world. This was probably due to the greater movement of diverse cultures across the region. The history remains shrouded in mystery but with a careful study and examination of the petroglyphs and inscriptions, many historical events of significance can be discerned, which have not found their place in historical accounts.

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