

Rock art in the Swat Valley, Pakistan

Badshah Sardar
Department of Pakistan Studies
Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: bsardar@yahoo.com

Abstract

Swat valley, an administrative district of the province of Pakistan is rich in innumerable ancient remains like stupas, monasteries, viharas, forts, castles, petroglyphs, carvings, rock inscriptions, painted shelters and stele. This paper attempts to study the rock art of the region including the published materials as well as the author's new discoveries.

Introduction

Swat valley is an administrative district of the province of Pakistan, previously known as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Modern Swat valley and the ancient Udyana (garden) of the Chinese pilgrims, surrounded by hills on all the four sides, and drained by numerous hill torrents from the surrounding hills that flow into the river Swat. This fabulous geographical setting with its excellent drainage system means that the valley was ideal for human settlement in general and for Buddhist communities in particular. The plains of the valley are extensively irrigated by the River Swat, and the region is rich, fertile and productive even today. In past it would have provided sufficient food surplus to its inhabitants. It was also due to its unique location that settlers from the Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan, came down and occupied the valley at different times (Stacul 1969: 82-85). It remained an attractive place for foreign invaders and a sacred place for religious activities. It was a melting pot, and became the center of the amalgamation and assimilation of different races and nationalities including the Persians, Greeks, Mauryans, Scythians, Parthians, Kushans (Yueh-chih), White Huns, Turks, Hindu Shahis, and Muslims, who passed through this valley on their way to and from the India sub-continent (Smith 1924: 53-55).

The innumerable ancient remains—stupas, monasteries, *viharas*, forts, castles, petroglyphs, carvings, rock inscriptions, painted shelters and stele are scattered in the plains and the hilly slopes all over the valley. The archaeological materials from these sites bear testimony of its cultural relations with the East and West. Several hundred archaeological sites spanning 5000 years of history speak about this. The rugged hills of the valley bears beautifully contoured sculptures of the past.

The term 'rock art' is used for all types of artistic expression found on natural rocks, cliffs, caves, shelters, and on the surface of boulders. In other words sketches, graphics, images, designs engraved or painted on the rock surfaces are generally referred to as rock art and it is common feature of almost all ancient civilizations of the world. The rock art is broadly divided into two forms; engraving and painting. The former covers petroglyphs and epigraphs or inscriptions and are generally found over large boulders and open surfaces of rocks, either carved with the help of some sharp cutting instruments or pecked with hammers. The later limited to walls of rock shelters and caves formed in cliffs or overhangs of mountains. Paintings were

produced using various mediums such as fingers, animal hair brushes, sticks and feathers. In ancient time painted images were drawn with mineral colour collected from the local geological deposits, plants and animals.

The oldest engravings are thought to be those, which depict the animals in profile, rather than static poses, but executed in great detail. It seems that some of the earliest depictions were executed by hunter-gatherers followed by the agriculturalists more than 30,000 years old (Mathpal 1998: 47-53). Rock art has the capacity to display the unknown panorama of the distant past before our eyes and it should not be simply viewed as events depicting daily lives of remote societies since it also renders a spiritual reality. Stone has been used from time immemorial for engraving, painting and writing purposes. It is an undying medium /material, used by primitive man and one of its great functions was to make his belief and depictions earliest and everlasting in the form of art.

Petroglyph

In the Swat valley, prehistoric petroglyphs found at Gogdara by G. Tucci in 1955, depicted wild and domestic animals and anthropomorphic representations (Tucci 1958: 291-92). According to the excavator of the site, Gogdara rock presents 117 graffiti on the cliff surface. Among these 71 are animal figures, 17 represent objects, 29 unidentified graffiti where a human figure is completely absent (Olivieri 1998: 60-61). Prehistoric rock engravings have also been found at Hathiano Kandao (Khan 1983: 59). Numerous engravings of the site bear technical pecking similar to the engravings of Gogdara, although the animals depicted are different and dated to 2nd millennium BCE (Khan 1983: 60). The most fabulous rock art research conducted by the Italian Archaeological Mission, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO) in the area, reveals rock wall, caves with carvings, cup-marks and tank sites spread all over the Kandak valley (Olivieri & Vidale 2004 : 121).

In light of the above published data one can argue that the rock art of the Swat valley presents continuity from prehistoric to the historic period. The rock art so studied and interpreted by the scholars have yielded many phases of history and illustrates the cultural, social and economic life of its creators and their surroundings. Following is the description of the petroglyph recently discovered by the author in this region.

Petroglyphs of Charai (Madiyan) (Fig. 1 & 2)

In upper Swat valley, petroglyphs made of granite and facing west has been discovered by the author near the hamlet of Charai, 2 km short of Madiyan village, on the left bank of the river Swat. The site is situated on the left side of road leading toward Madiyan. This locality is famous for Buddhist archaeological vestiges, like Buddha foot prints, its inscription at Tirat published by S. Konow (Konow 1929: 98-9, pl. 1.5), Khazana Gut graffiti and its inscription mentioned by A. Stein (Stein 1930: 55-56) and later on by G. Tucci (Tucci 1958: 303). The most important aspect of this discovery is that it has not been reported earlier.

The boulder of the petroglyphs is lying in the middle of cultivated fields and inside an apple trees orchard. The boulder is embedded in the ground and is partially destroyed by the land

owner recently. The most outstanding is a group of archaic petroglyphs that distinguish them clearly from the historic reliefs. The exposed portion of the boulder reveals a rough outline of two human bodies, both are in standing position. The natural form of man is not portrayed by the artist, however sufficient details are given to recognize the forms as human, it seems that the artist was interested in man's action rather than in human form. The rough outline of the human body in a rectangular shape with rounded head on top, hands extended sideways, legs are straight down, even though face could not be reproduced in its true form. The artistic details of plate no. 01 if closely observed, disclose theme of hunting, which was the chief means of livelihood of the primitive society.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

On the other hand we have got solid body made up in a bi-triangular style, well known in metal from Tepe Hissar dating to third millennium BCE. Such a bi-triangular form of the body is seen in another example in which the hands make a bracket. This style is known in the trans-Pamir region and could be dated to 3rd or 4th millennium BCE. (Samashev1993: 36). The artistic details of the petroglyphs are not clear due to heavy patina over the rock surface.

Painting

Ancient paintings are found in almost every part of the sub-continent where there are rock shelters or overhanging paintings were applied to them in many ways by using fingers or brushes. The painters always used natural substance of red, yellow, black and fine clay for white. Executions of ancient paintings were not done for aesthetic reasons to decorate or beautify a shelter. It represents a cultural activity, which existed in the everyday life of the artists of ancient time. Painting is a key to understand the complex symbolic rituals and ceremonies of the remote antiquities. Although it seems that few paintings may be executed as a record of everyday occurrences. Symbolism and ritual played an extremely important part in the lives of these people, who possessed no written language. Painting is one of the mediums in which ancient artist has tried to express his mind, his desires and aspirations. This medium of expression started in Pakistan much earlier than other continents of the World.

The limited archaeological explorations so far conducted by the scholars have now conformed that shelters bearing traces of palaeolithic paintings are situated in the province of Baluchistan. The earliest specimens of paintings found in Pakistan are those discovered in Tor Ghar area of Loralai and Sulaiman Range of Zhob District of in Baluchistan. In Tor Ghar, 20 shelters while in Sulaiman Range 27 shelters of Paintings were reported. Thus in the present state of our knowledge history of paintings in Pakistan starts in Upper Palaeolithic period (Kakar, 2005: 22). The subject matter of the Tor Ghar and Sulaiman Range paintings is fighting and hunting scenes. They are figural paintings of animals and human beings painted in red or black on the undressed surfaces of rock-shelters. Some of the animals are shown in triangular form, rendering the body by two triangles at one corner. This method is typical for the Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods. This method is commonly used in the rock-engravings of the Upper Indus Valley (Khan 2000: 2).

Evidence of the early Bronze Age paintings so far known in Pakistan is recorded from the pot-shreds only. Pottery of remarkable variety has come down to us from the sites of Kile-Gul Mohammad (Allchin 1985: 101), Mundigak (Allchin 1985: 135), Amri (Allchin 1985: 144), Kot-Digi (Agrawal 1982: 130), Rehman-Dheri (Durrani 1981), Harappa (Vats 1940), BirkotGhundai (Stacul 1985: 348) and Ghalegay (Stacul 2005 : 211).The patterns on the pottery of these sites are geometrical and floral such as wavy lines, triangles, lozenges, diamonds, loops, intersecting circles, honey combs, pipal-leaf, fish scale, radiating sun, stylized animal figures (usually bull and ibex) and very rarely and crude human figures (Sardar 1992: 114-28). The colour they used was monochrome, bi-chrome and polychrome such as red, black, white and chocolate.

Nothing has survived if it ever existed from the time of Alexander's invasion of India in 327 BCE, and in Greek rule till the 1st century BCE. Only from Philostratus "life of Apollonius of Tyana" we learn that a temple in front of the Taxila city was beautifully decorated from inside

with paintings in the style of great Greek painters of the fourth century BCE, (Dar 1998:88). However from Butkara-I in Swat a fragment of fresco painting was discovered, which is dated in the 2nd century BCE. Earlier, this was considered as the earliest specimen of paintings exposed in any part of Pakistan (Faccenna 1981, fig.I & L).

In the Swat valley the existence of shelters with vestiges of paintings were reported in Kafir-Kot area, near Thana village. The paintings of Kafir-kot represent, a Buddhist sacred area depict a man holding weapon of bow for firing arrows (Khan *et al.* 1995: 333). Traces of the paintings were also reported from the sites of Hindu anohatai, Shamo and Marano-tangai. Paintings of Hindu anohatai are famous for series of Buddhist Stupas. The Shamo site shows men with weapons, a horse and a stupa. Marano-tangai shelter reveals a set of abstract symbols, squares intersected by a cross and square filled with a single dot. Paintings of all these sites were dated between 1st-4th century CE (Khan *et al.* 1995: 350).

In 2000, the Italian Archaeological Mission (IsIAO) discovered three painted rock shelters in Kandag valley of Swat. They documented painted shelters with names Sargah-sar, Kalkai-kandao and Dwolasmannai-patai (Vidale & Olivieri, 2002: 173). Sargah-sar paintings reveal, human figures, some of with carrying weapons, animals and elaborate geometric symbols are thickly clustered. While the paintings of Kalkai-kandao shelter represent crowded designs, vivid composition of animals, humans and geometric patterns. Dwolasmannai-patai shelter show complex, irregular geometric pattern and human carrying weapons. All the three shelters are located far from Buddhist sacred areas, and this differs in one important respect from those already known from Thana valley. They are dated between 1st and 3rd Century CE. (Vidale & Olivieri 2002: 189). Recently a chance discovery of mural paintings from the Buddhist monastery of Jinan Wali Dheri (Taxila) is stated as unique phenomena in the whole of Gandhara region (Khan & Hasan, 2004; 20). Following is the description of the Kaferi Smasta paintings discovered by the author near Kukrai village in Murghazar sub-valley of District Swat.

Painted shelter of Kaferi Smasta (Fig. 3)

In 2000 the author found a shelter with the vestiges of paintings in Charoona Dara locality on south of present Kukrai village in Murghazar sub-valley of Swat. This shelter is about 3 km south of Kukrai village in Charoona Dara locality. Situated on the crest of Gishar hill in west of Mount Ilam, the site is known as Kaferi Smasta (shelter), with paintings of hunters and human figures. The shelter is shallow, semi-circular of about 1.50 m in depth and 5 m height. No signs of artificial intervention were found.

The paintings executed inside the natural undressed surface of the shelter. The images are painted on the right side wall of the shelter, with a mud pigment. On the right side wall where the ceiling begins to slope down reveal seven figures and representation of a monument. To facilitate description of the paintings, it may be divided into two groups although they make up a uniform composition. The top register reveals a person standing in front of monument in akimbo position; with the hands on the hips and the elbows turned outwards. Another is irregular structure of a stupa, having six tiers and a human figure on its top, such paintings have already been reported from the site of Hodar at Upper Indus Valley (see *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan ANP*, vol. 03, Pl. 102).



Fig. 3 Painted shelter of Kaferi Smasta

Human figures of the lower register are standing in the front in varying positions. All figures are with opened wide hands and legs. It seems that they are celebrating a hunting scene. The technique most commonly used for the painting is that of outlined figures, but human figures are more realistic on the wall of the shelter. All the human figures hold a weapon, a tool; bow and arrow, or a club in their hands. The human figures of KaferiSmasta reveal resemblance to the painting of Dwolasmane-patai shelter of Kandag valley (Oliveri 2005:220).

All these objects were probably painted with a finger or struck using whitish ochre. There is a complete absence of polychrome. The original paintings were in white, and a faint white line remains visible around figures subsequently repainted in yellow. KaferiSmasta paintings are characteristically in a yellowish cream shade, which at times can be made to look pink from the underlying red sandstone. It is not known why this colour was chosen. However, since the shelter's greater exposure to the weather is responsible for deteriorating many of the paintings. Shepherds have frequently utilized the site for shelter, the fleece of their flocks, rubbing paintings from the walls, or smoke from their fires are eliminating most of the artistic details.

Epigraphs (Inscriptions)

Epigraphs and writing has been medium of communication from the beginning of human society. The study in epigraphy deals mainly with ancient inscriptions engraved or carved on stone, metal and some time on clay tablets. Epigraphs were often found on rocks, stone pillars, slabs, pedestals of images, tombs, religious and secular buildings and copper plates.

Swat valley situated on the cross road of ancient 'Silk Route', remained an active centre for merchants, foreign traders, religious pilgrims and communities. The connection between China and Udyana across the hanging passages is well attested in Chinese literary sources. In the Swat valley tremendous concentration of Buddhist period reliefs, engravings and inscriptions have been documented in successive campaigns by the indigenous and foreign scholars (Vidale & Olivieri 2002: 173-224). It may be useful nevertheless to publish some of these inscriptions which may prove to be of special value for tracing history of the land route and culture of ancient Udyana, even if a final evaluation is not possible at present. Priority was given to a publication of the material rather a comprehensive understanding of all inscriptions, as it is hoped that this might add up to the existing epigraphical records.

Bulk of the epigraphs written in different scripts i.e, Kharoshthi, Brahmi, Proto-Sharada, Nagrai, Persian and Arabic scripts were reported from the valley. The outstanding among them are three Buddhist inscriptions in Swat published by (Bühler 1979: 133-135). Buddha foot prints inscription from Tirat in Upper Swat valley reveals Buddha foot prints with Kharoshthi letters dated to the 1st. century BCE. (Konow 1929: 98-9) (pl. 1.5), Other important inscriptions recorded in the valley are, Swat rock inscription (Konow 1929:9-10), Saddo rock inscription (Konow 1929: 9), LoriyanTangai pedestal inscription of the year 318, no. 4860, no. 4871, no. 4995, no. 5095, (Konow, 1929).A Kharoshthi inscription from Butkara-I (Swat), reveals Kharoshthi letters (Petech 1966: 80-82). A set of brass bowls and a relic casket from Swat valley with Kharoshthi alphabets and a slab from Malakand Agency with Kharoshthi inscription have been reported and published by H. Falk (Falk 2003: 76 – 80).

Similarly the Khazana Gut inscription reveals Brahmi characters resembling to Sharada and Arabic scripts. The Arabic writing or graffiti reveals the Islamic *Kalma* engraved twice. The graffiti covers an area 3. 35 metres high and 2.43 metres wide (Stein 1930: 55-56;Tucci 1958: 303). In 1984 a historical inscription was discovered on the slope of Raja Gira castle in the valley. It is a marble slab consisting of a fine cursive script (*naskhi*), 6 lines of inscription celebrating the foundation of Ghaznavid mosque at Swat valley. According to this discovery the Ghaznavid mosque at Udigram was founded in 1048-49 CE (Khan 1985: 153-166). Another historical inscription known as 'Zalamkot bilingual inscription' reveals Muslim invasion of the region (Rehman 1997-98: 35-40).

However, the paleographic investigation in the Swat valley is still in its very beginnings, and a final classification can be reached at only after a comprehensive study of the entire material. Although a large number of inscriptions have been found in area during the last few decades, an enormous amount of work is still required for its study and documentation. The great mass of material still scattered un-noticed and un-documented in the entire valley. Since it is dispersed over an extensively inaccessible area and over a long span of time, when read and translated fully, will help in dating and interpreting the connected rock reliefs and stele. Besides the limitations resulting from the content of the inscriptions presented here, only those have been taken into consideration, which the author have inspected on the spot. As a result of the author's exploration conducted in 2002 and in the subsequent years in the locality of Jahanabad previously known as Shakori (Stein 1930: 50) famous for Buddhist establishments, three

Brahmi rock inscriptions which are still in situ came to light. Their location, existing state of preservation, stylistic details and literary compositions are stated below.

Jahanabad Rock Inscriptions

This hamlet is situated at distance of about one and half kilometer northeast of Shakhorai village and about five km northeast of Manglaur village on the left bank of Sairkhwar, is approachable by a Jeep track from main Malamjaba road. During the author's field survey of the Valley he found three inscriptions on two gigantic living rocks. Two huge rocks on the hillside one is known as 'Oba Ghat' while the other is known as "KhazanaGhat". The site is approachable by a steep rise over boulders and through thorny wild bushes. Two inscriptions are carved on 'Oba Ghat', meaning the rock of the water and there being a spring below it. The third inscription is engraved on a huge isolated rock of 'KhazanaGhat'. Their details are as follows:

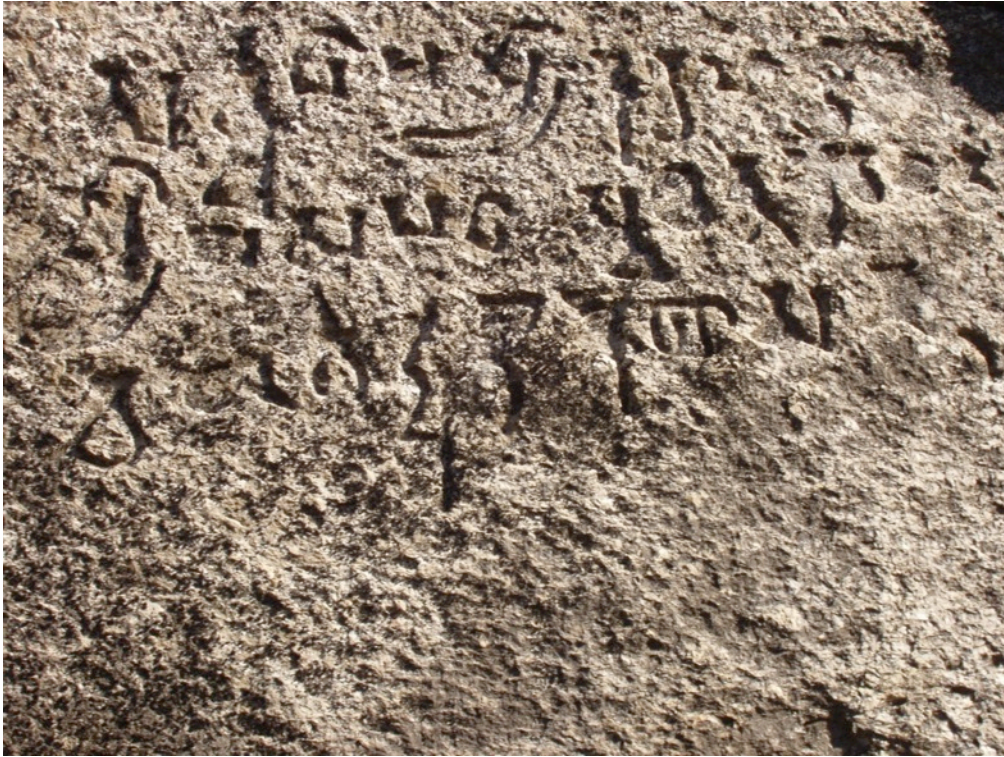


Fig. 4 Oba Ghat Inscription I

Oba Ghat Inscription-I (Fig. 4)

Measurement: length 4 metres, 3 lines in north south direction

Material: Granite

Script: Gupta Brahmi

Orientation: facing west

Reference: (Bühler 1979: 135; Stein 1930:50)

Reading: Line 1: sarvvapāpasyākaranakusalasyopasampada
Line 2: svacittavyavadānam

Line 3: caetadbudanusasanam

Translation: “Not to commit any sin, to acquire merit, to purify one’s mind—that is the teaching of Buddha”

Oba Ghat inscription-I, is a Sanskrit rendering of *Dhammapada*, verse 183 (Bühler 1979: 135). It carved on the upper portion of the rock immediately above the cave is engraved in bold and deeply incised characters. The inscription contains three lines in north south direction, carved high up in the center of the rock face; no one can reach or teach it from the ground surface. This inscription is in a bad condition due to weathering.

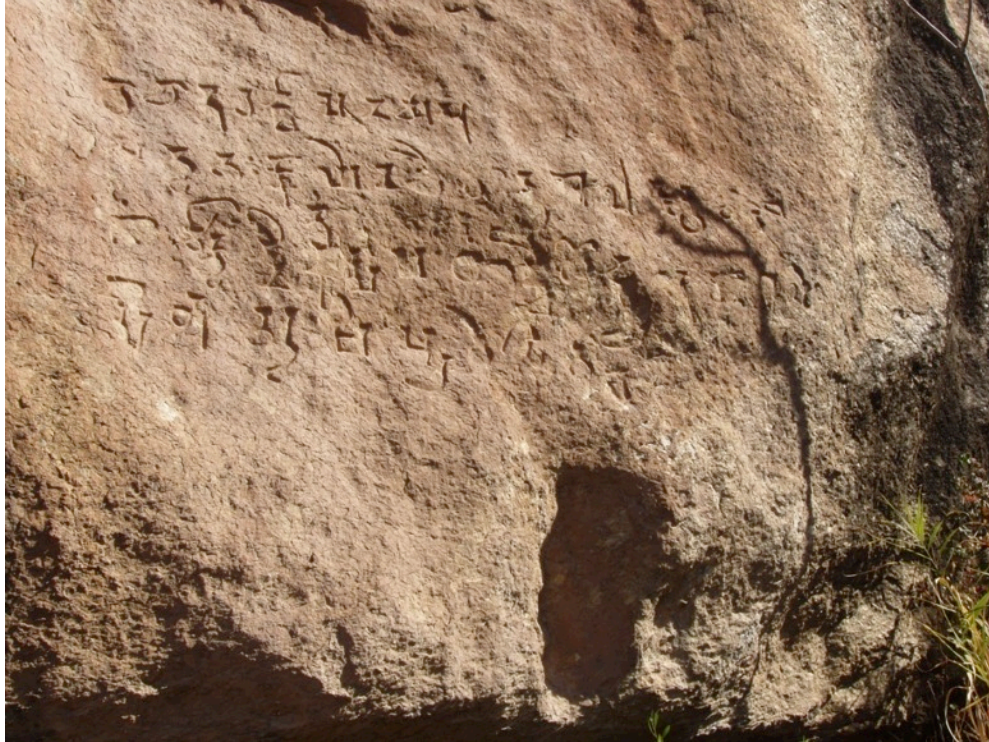


Fig. 5 Oba Ghat Inscription II

Oba Ghat Inscription-II (Fig. 5)

Measurement: length 4 metres, 4 lines in north south direction

Material: Granite

Script: Gupta Brahmi

Orientation: facing west

Reference: (Bühler 1979: 135; Stein 1930: 50)

Reading: Line 1: vācānurakst
Line 2: samvrtahkkāyanacaivakusalannakurvan
Line 3: tāstrāyinkarmapathānuisokyaāraghye
Line 4: nmārgamrpippraveditam

Translation: “(Let him be one) who guards his speech, is well restrained in mind, and commits no evil with his body. Keeping these three roads of action clear, one may gain the path taught by the Sages”.

Oba Ghat inscription-II is a rather free Sanskrit rendering of *Dhammapada*, verse 281 (Bühler 1979: 135). Engraved in bold and deeply incised characters, having four lines, extends over a surface of about four metres in length in north south direction. The lower inscription is carved in the right lower corner of the rock and easily accessible to human activities. It is exposed to both natural and human vandalism.

Both inscriptions engraved on the western face of the rock; contain Sanskrit verses from the *Dhammapada*. The palaeographic character of their letters, according to Bühler's analysis, seems to date the inscriptions as from the early Kushan period (Stein 1930: 50).

KhazanaGhat Inscription-III (Fig. 6)

Measurement: length 2.5 metres, 3 lines in east west direction

Material: Granite

Script: GuptaBrahmi

Orientation: facing west

Reference: (Bühler 1979: 134; Stein 1930: 50)

Reading: Line 1: anityāvava (sic! for vata) samskāṛāutpādavyaya
Line 2: dharminahutpadyahinirud (dh)yantetepā (read tesām)

Line 3: vyupasamassukham

Translation: “the Samskaras are truly subject to originating and decay. For, after originated the disappear. Calming them is happiness”

This is the famous verse spoken according the *Maha-Parinibbana-Sutta*, vi. 16, by Indra at the time of Sakyanuni's death, or proclaimed by Buddha himself according to the *Maha-Sudassana-Jataka* (Bühler 1979: 134).

The stone, on which the inscription-III exists, is known as “KhazanaGhat”, as some treasure was at one time found near it. The extensive ruins still exist near the inscription. According to P. O. V. Hinüber, the inscription is well written in spite of two very obvious mistakes as indicated. Paleographically the inscription can be dated roughly to the 6th century CE (personal communication).



Fig. 6 Khazana Ghat Inscription-III

Conclusion

All the three are deeply and boldly incised on rough stones. The letters, which vary between two and four inches in height, resemble in many respects the so called North-Western Gupta Brahmi characters. Though all three inscriptions unfortunately have not furnished conformed date, yet they provide some justification to the following conclusion;

The Jahanabad inscriptions of Gupta Brahmi characters rendering a *Dhammapada*, verses reveal and testify the fact that Jahanabad was once an active center of Buddhism. On the basis of Palaeographical characters Hinüber roughly suggests a 6th century CE for these inscriptions (personal communication). According to him it is certainly not younger than about 650 CE at the very latest. Beside these three inscriptions, the colossal relief of Jahanabad Buddha of 7th century CE, and rock relief of seated Avlokitesvara of 7th century CE, in centre of the orchard are the living proof of Buddhism in the Swat valley (Sardar 2005 : Pls. 68 & 69).

It was generally believed that Brahmi did not traveled towards North West regions of subcontinent, but the existence of these inscriptions reveal that during Gupta period Brahmi prevailed as language of *Dhammapada*, verse. It throws light on the fact that engravings and carvings practices were on peak during the 7th century CE in the Swat valley. Those who proposed a theory that Buddhist art was finished in 4th or 5th century CE should revise their thesis. In brief stone has been used from the time of immemorial for petroglyphs, engraving, paintings and writing purposes. It must be remember that any form of rock art has the capacity to display the unknown scene before our eyes. It should not be simply viewed as events depicting daily lives of the remote society. Rock art also renders a spiritual reality before us. It was undying material, used by the primitive man and one of its great functions was to make the rock art everlasting.

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