

**Rock Art, Old Tibetan Inscriptions and Shrine Traditions  
from the Afghan Pamir: four journal articles  
by John Mock, Ph.D.**

**Rock Art**

“New Discoveries of Rock Art in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and Pamir: A Preliminary Study,” appears in *The Silk Road*, 11: Fall 2013. This article is a preliminary and general presentation of rock art in Wakhan District of Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province. It reviews rock art identified by European expeditions between 1968 and 1974 and presents five newly identified rock art galleries in both the settled area and in the Pamir regions of Wakhan. The rock art is discussed in comparison with rock art in Tajikistan's Pamir region, identified by Soviet and Tajik archaeologists; rock art in Ladakh, identified by French archaeologists; and rock art in Pakistan, identified by German archaeologists. Although a precise chronology is not possible at this stage of research, the article suggests that some rock art may have been composed as early as the Bronze Age and some as recently as modern medieval times. The article is concerned with the human use of the Bam-e Dunya or Roof of the World, and with the question of the peopling of Wakhan. The article proposes directions for further study of Afghanistan's Wakhan and Pamir to better understand the ecological and cultural heritage of the Roof of the World.

**Old Tibetan Inscriptions**

Two articles appear in the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, Number 27, October 2013: “A Tibetan Toponym from Afghanistan”; and “Darkot Revisited: New Information on a Tibetan Inscription and *mchod-rten*”. These articles discuss Old Tibetan inscriptions in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan. The inscriptions were made during the Tibetan Imperial era in the 8th century CE, when Tibet controlled the routes through the Pamir. The inscriptions from Wakhan are recent discoveries by John Mock and Kimberley O'Neil during their extensive fieldwork in Wakhan.

**Shrine Traditions of Wakhan Afghanistan**

“Shrine Traditions of Wakhan Afghanistan” is published in a special issue on the Pamir of the *Journal of Persianate Studies*, Volume 4, Number 2, 2011. This study, based on field work from 2004-2010, describes the religious, social, and historical context of shrines of Wakhan District of Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan. The study draws comparisons between documented shrine traditions in adjacent Wakhan Tajikistan and in Hunza-Gojal of Pakistan.

## **John Mock Biography**

John Mock, Ph.D., is a South Asian scholar and linguistic anthropologist who specializes in South Asian languages and literature. His area of expertise is Wakhi language and culture, and the folklore of the Pamir / Hindukush / Karakoram / Himalaya ethnolinguistic region. His main research is on the oral traditions of the Wakhi people of northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan and he has received major support from the Fulbright-Hays Fellowship program, the Christensen Fund, and the Fulbright Senior Scholar program. Dr. Mock has authored nine journal articles, ten book chapters, several technical reports, and delivered twenty-one invited national and international lectures or papers. He taught Urdu and Hindi at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

As a husband-and-wife team, John Mock and Kimberley O'Neil have coauthored four books and monographs, seven book chapters and five technical reports. They have consulted on tourism development and promotion, ecotourism, biodiversity conservation, parks and protected area management, and wildlife conservation in northern Pakistan, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir for the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Aga Khan Foundation (Afghanistan), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), IUCN-The World Conservation Union, and the Snow Leopard Conservancy. For fifteen years, they coauthored and contributed to several trekking, hiking and travel guidebooks for Lonely Planet Publications and received a National Outdoor Book Award.

Their love of mountains extends from the Sierra Nevada of California to Pakistan and Afghanistan where they have reconnoitered new trekking routes and crossed dozens of major passes and glaciers in the Karakoram, Hindukush and Pamir during the past thirty years, logging more than 10,000 kilometers, 60 passes, and 50 glacier traverses. Two of their expeditions were supported by Shipton-Tilman grants from W.L. Gore & Associates.

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# NEW DISCOVERIES OF ROCK ART IN AFGHANISTAN'S WAKHAN CORRIDOR AND PAMIR: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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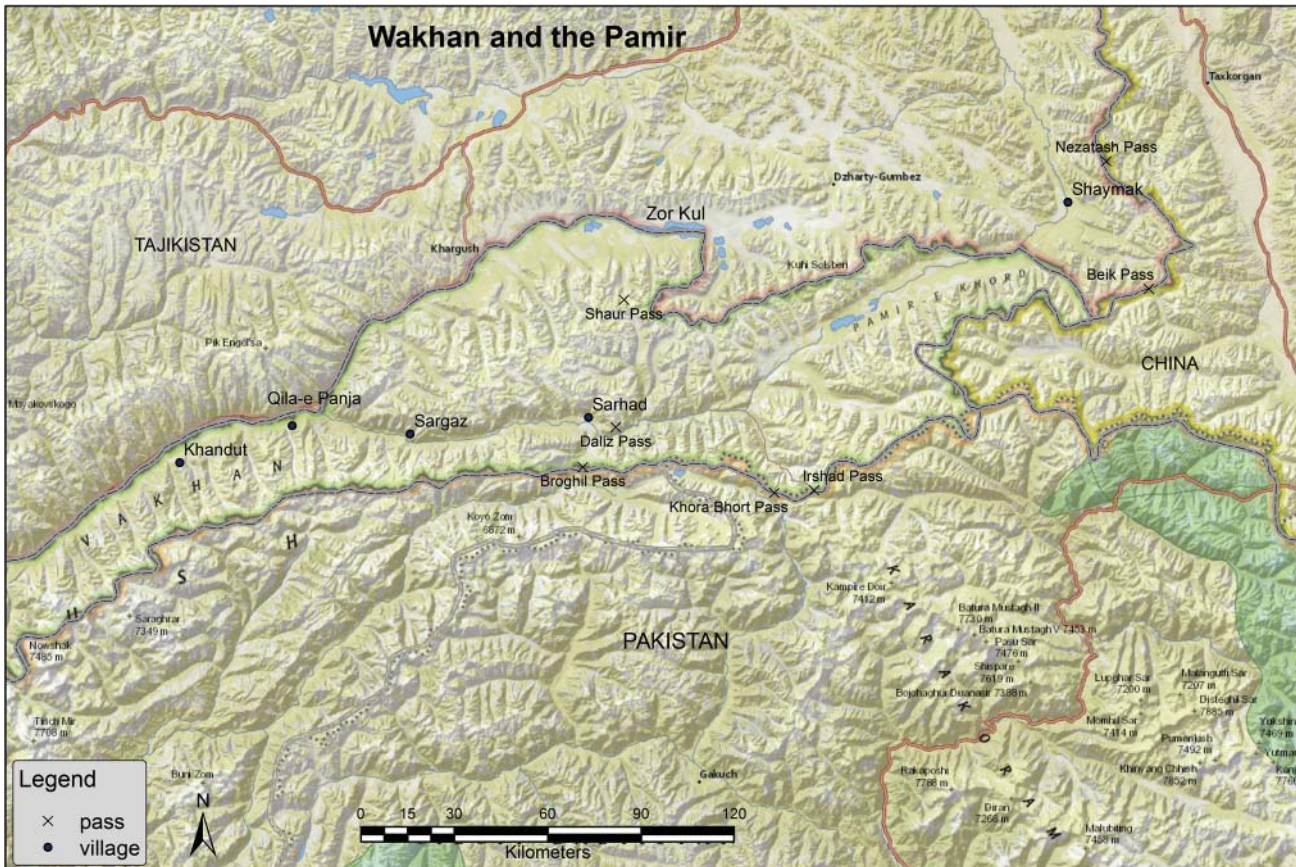
From at least the first century BCE when China's Han Dynasty became the predominant power in the Pamir, merchants, monks, travelers and occasionally armies passed through Wakhan and the Pamir along one of the main branches of the so-called "Silk Road" (Fig. 1). Their accounts provide a rich historical record of the kingdom of Wakhan<sup>1</sup> and of its strategic role in the great rivalries for control of routes through the Pamir.<sup>2</sup> Wakhan's archaeological record, in comparison, remains largely unknown. Our knowledge of the historical archaeology of Wakhan comes largely from Aurel Stein's brief visit in 1906. Stein, who sought to correlate on-the-ground reality with the textual record of the Tang Annals,<sup>3</sup> traveled through Wakhan in May 1906 on his way to Khotan.<sup>4</sup> He entered Wakhan from the south via the Broghil pass on May 19, fol-

lowed the main trail along the true right (north) bank of the Wakhan river to the Pamir, and exited Wakhan via the Wakhjir pass on May 27. Although *The Geographical Journal* of 1939 proclaimed that "thorough excavation of the ancient sites in Wakhan must be perhaps the most important single item on any agenda of archaeological work in Central Asia" (Barger 1939, p. 389), the historical archaeology of Wakhan and the Afghan Pamir has received only one survey (Miller 2009) since Stein's 1906 visit.

## Prehistoric archaeology of Wakhan

The prehistoric and protohistoric archaeology of Wakhan has been briefly noted in reports by French,

Fig. 1. Map of Wakhan and the Pamir.



German and Austrian Pamir expeditions and a UNDP/FAO survey of wildlife, all between 1968 and 1974.<sup>5</sup> They reported numerous rock art depictions of ibex and hunters on foot, sometimes armed with bows and occasionally accompanied by what appear to be dogs. One well-executed panel depicts mounted archers hunting wild yaks (Naumann 1973; Dor 1974). The panel is on a boulder that sits on a small terrace slightly above and adjacent to the Wakhan River where the spring-fed Zang Kuk stream joins the glacier-fed Wakhan River at 3600m elevation. The river runs through a steep-walled gorge in this section and there is no area suitable for cultivation and settlement anywhere nearby. A small rock-wall roofless enclosure that travelers along the trail utilize is the only built structure. Naumann suggested that this location might have been a campsite for hunters who made the rock carvings depicting their wild yak hunt.

Figure 2 shows this rock art scene. The overall depiction is a yak hunt by two riders on horseback using bows. The two yaks appear to be fleeing the riders, with their heads raised as is typical of running yaks, as is the raised tail of the upper yak. The yaks have long curved horns, characteristic of wild yaks (Fig. 3). The yaks, although large, are in proportion with the horses. The skillful riders are aiming their bows, which appear to be composite bows and were the typical weapon of mounted hunters of the Inner Asian area. The Scythians in particular were noted for their use of such bows.<sup>6</sup> The lower hunter perhaps has a quiver on his back, but this is not certain. Nor is it possible to determine if the riders' feet are depicted in stirrups, which, according to the Soviet archaeologist Vadim Ranov, appeared in Central Asia in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE (Ranov 2001, p. 127). The depictions

*Fig. 2. Riders with bows hunting wild yaks. Zang Kuk, Wakhan.*



*Fig. 3. A wild yak, characterized by the long curved horns and shoulder hump. Photo copyright © Daniel Miller.*

are quite life-like and lively, and appear to have been made with attention to detail. This hunting scene was composed by completely bruising the surface of the rock for each figure, rather than pecking only the outline of each figure, resulting in a silhouette depiction of the yaks, horses and riders. In 1972, when Naumann observed these depictions, he noted that the rock carvings are "only insignificantly deeper than the rough surface," which appears to be even more true now. The loss of detail, especially towards the center of the panel, may be due to gradual repatination and to erosion of the patina that may once have been more substantial on the rock surface. Such processes occur gradually over time.<sup>7</sup> The erosion and repatination of this panel suggests considerable age, which would support attribution to hunters of the Iron Age, although a more recent dating to the Kushan period of the first millennium CE cannot be ruled out.

Most of the rock art identified in Wakhan is in the lower elevation area, where Wakhi villages are located on alluvial fans formed by side streams flowing into the main Panj River. Some rock art was also identified in the high elevation Pamir regions of Wakhan.<sup>8</sup> The wildlife biologist Ron Petocz, who studied Marco Polo sheep (argali) and prepared a draft management plan for a wildlife reserve in the Big Pamir, made the most detailed survey of the region and included a brief but interesting report on archaeology. Petocz photographed several scenes of ibex hunters using bows and a remarkable panel depicting "a line

of human figures holding three-pronged spears.” He also reported “noticeable mounds” in the Little Pamir, where Kyrgyz “claim to have found bronze projectile points” (Petocz 1978, pp. 20–21). Soviet archaeologists working in the adjacent Pamir regions of what is now Tajikistan between 1946 and 1991 located numerous rock art sites and more than 260 Saka kurgans (Ranov 1984, p. 80; Ranov 2001, pp. 122–49; Yablonsky 1995, pp. 234–37). The proximity of the Tajikistan Pamir sites to the Afghanistan Little Pamir sites and the similarity of their rock art suggest a correlation between the Pamir sites. The Soviet archaeologists found daggers, arrowheads and zoomorphic plaques, all in bronze in “classical Saka form” (Yablonsky 1995, p. 235). Further archaeological investigation is needed to determine the extent and continuity of Saka sites in the greater Pamir region.

The high altitude Pamir grasslands supported wildlife that attracted nomadic hunters from at least the Late Bronze Age.<sup>9</sup> Rock art depictions of wild yaks, ibex, argali and possibly stags suggest game may have been abundant not only in the broad Pamir but also in the many smaller side valleys that feed the main Panj River. Recent research shows that in the early Holocene, “hunter-gatherer populations well adapted to high altitude life conditions in summer settled in the Pamir plateau, especially near the Kara Kul Lake” (Malassé and Gaillard 2011, p. 123). Although this research also indicates that hunter-gatherers abandoned the Pamir in the mid-Holocene, probably due to increasing aridity in the northern Pamir, the southern Pamir may have experienced monsoonal moisture and retained biodiversity that continued to draw hunters. Human presence in Wakhan, probably hunters, is attested (radiocarbon of charcoal) from the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE (Raunig 1984).<sup>10</sup> Hunters undoubtedly came seasonally, when high elevation

meadows were accessible and relatively snow free, and some may have belonged to communities of agropastoralists that developed in the Amu Darya and Hindukush regions during the late Holocene Bronze Age (Malassé and Gaillard 2011, p. 129; Meihe et al. 2009a, p. 255). This seasonal usage likely contributed to the peopling of Wakhan, and the earliest dating (radiocarbon of pollen) for cultivation is the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (Raunig 1984, p. 19). In addition to hunters on foot, hunting in the Pamir may have been carried out by horse-riding Central Asian steppe peoples who used a composite or double bow,<sup>11</sup> portrayed in rock art from Wakhan.

### Current work

Between 2004 and 2007, Kimberley O’Neil and I made five trips to Wakhan. Although the archaeology and cultural heritage of Wakhan were not the primary objectives of our visits, they were always in mind, and we took the opportunity to visit the sites described by Stein and to explore widely throughout Wakhan and the Afghan Pamir. These efforts have yielded remarkable rewards.<sup>12</sup> This article is a preliminary and general presentation of the rock art identified in Wakhan that is not directly linked through iconography or epigraphy with the era of Tibetan Imperial occupation of Wakhan.<sup>13</sup> This newly discovered rock art offers valuable information on human presence in Wakhan from at least the Iron Age onward,<sup>14</sup> up to and including the Silk Route trade and travel across what Afghans call *Bam-e Duniya*, or the *Roof of the World*. The article is organized geographically by site and presents five newly discovered rock art galleries: Grass Place, Mud Place, Shrine Rock, Big Rock, and Rock Pile sites.<sup>15</sup>

### Grass Place gallery

This rock art gallery is located along the Wakhan River in the settled area of Wakhan. It is a compact site in an area occasionally flooded during high river flow. Hence, there are no terraces. A broken cliff face rises almost vertically and on the dark polished rock faces of the lower cliff are several rock art panels. Most of the art depicts ibex hunting, which is the most commonly observed composition in Wakhan. The panels are palimpsests, as indicated by the differing degrees of repainting of the compositions on the panels. This indicates that the compositions were



Fig. 4. *Ibex palimpsest, Grass Place gallery.*

made at different times but is only a relative indicator of age.

The three very large ibex, shown in silhouette, are the most detailed and the most repatinated images in the panel shown in Fig. 4, preceding page (Color Plate IIIa). These ibex are depicted in full silhouette, with long curving horns. The large upper left ibex is depicted with knobbed horns and four legs. A long slender line under the body extending from the hind-quarters appears to represent a penis, and the lower right large ibex also displays the same. On the upper right, a small ibex is also represented with penis and knobbed horns.

In the bottom center of the panel, below and right of the lower large ibex, is another ibex with very curled, spiral-like horns (Fig. 5). We can compare these ibex with similar ibex images from Alchi in Ladakh, published by Henri-Paul Francfort (Francfort et al. 1990, Figs. 21, 22, 28). Overlaying these images are lighter images of ibex and humans. They are all depicted in stick-like form, lacking the detail and silhouette composition of the older, more repatinated ibex images. Of interest are the two humans standing side-by-side, as though holding hands. A. H. Dani published similar images from the Ziarat I and II sites near Chilas in the Indus Valley and

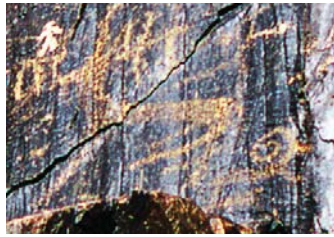


Fig. 5. Detail of Fig. 4.

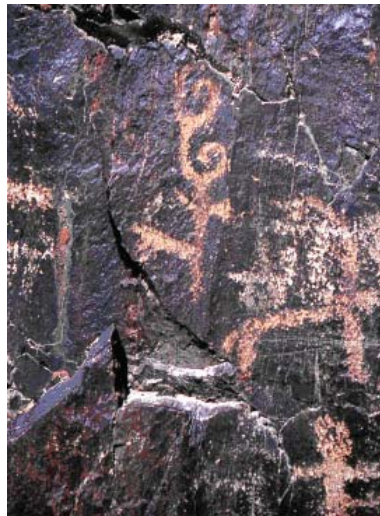


Fig. 7. (above) Detail of Fig. 6 showing "flaming" antlers/horns.

Fig. 6. (left) Panel showing several ibex and a human.

suggested that depictions of men holding hands may represent dancing in celebration of a successful ibex hunt (Dani 1983, p. 22; Figs. 22, 24).

A separate panel in the same gallery has many small, heavily repatinated ibex images and one human image with outstretched arms (Fig. 6). The ibex at the lower left are depicted in silhouette. The upper ibex of the lower left group has a sinuously curved neck, which is suggestive of the 'S' style of steppe art. It is similar in style to rock art depictions of ibex from Langar, an extensive site in the Wakhi settled area of Tajikistan (Ranov 2001, Fig. 11). Below it are two ibex facing each other. In the center of the panel is an ibex or a deer with "flaming" horns or antlers (Fig. 7). Readers will immediately recognize these as a characteristic style associated with steppe nomads. This style has been reported from Ladakh (Francfort et al. 1990; Bruneau and Vernier 2010) and from the upper Indus (Dani 1983; Jettmar 1989). It is also attested, as previously mentioned, from the Pamir areas of Tajikistan that are adjacent to Wakhan. This Wakhan rock art is situated geographically between the Central Asian sites and the sites in the upper Indus and in Ladakh, which are south of the main Karakoram and Tian Shan mountain ranges that separate Central Asia from South Asia. These stylistic and geographic correlations suggest a circulation of people between the Pamir and the southern fringes of the Pamir-Karakoram-Hindukush mountain region.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, at the same site, is an image depicting a human walking in stride, with arms bent, leading what appears to be a horse on which is seated another person (Fig. 8). The rider has two long lines angling downward from the crown of the head, which may represent hair and could indicate that the rider is female. Above the horse and rider is another human who may be holding a spear. Behind this human are other humans

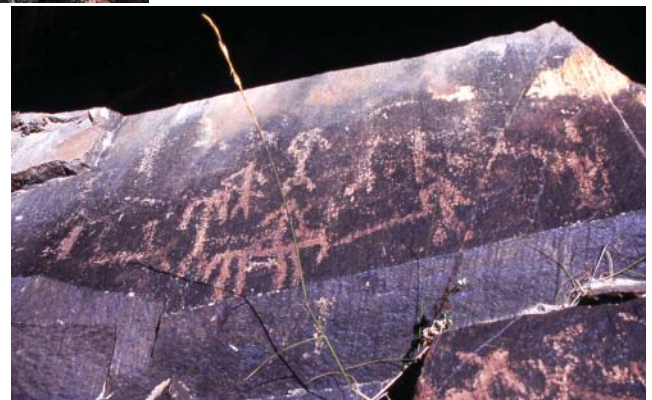


Fig. 8. (right) Human leading horse with rider.



with exaggeratedly long arms and torsos. These depictions are significantly repatinated and weathered. They do not seem to have been executed with a sharp edge, but rather to have been bruised into the rock surface with a more blunt tool. The humans and the horse are in stick-like style and may be of a similar age as the other stick-like images at this site. These depictions may be of less age than the ibex depictions previously discussed, based on comparative repatination. Perhaps they are from early human settlement in Wakhan or perhaps from as recent as medieval times. The weathering and repatination suggests that they are not more modern compositions, but it should be noted that even today, Wakhi and Kyrgyz women ride horses that are led by men walking on foot.

### Mud Place gallery

This site is also located along the Wakhan River in the settled area of Wakhan. It is an extensive site, with rock art depicted on small boulders that sit on a very long but narrow terrace above the present level of the river. The compositions are not palimpsests. Rather, a single image or small single composition of images is depicted on each individual dark varnished boulder surface.<sup>17</sup>

Figures 9 and 10 depict wild yaks, which are no longer present in Wakhan.<sup>18</sup> These images are located well outside of typical yak habitat,<sup>19</sup> at an elevation of

approximately 3200m, comparable to the elevation of the Langar site in Tajikistan Wakhan, which has been described by Ranov (2001). The images appear to depict wild yaks with long curved horns and bushy tails. Figure 9 shows the characteristic prominent shoulder hump of a wild yak. These two figures depict neither a hunting scene nor a group of yaks, which might suggest domesticated yaks. Instead, each figure occurs alone on the rock surface as a solitary depiction of a powerful wild animal.

The two figures were executed with different techniques. Figure 9 was composed in silhouette, and Fig. 10 was composed in outline, except for the large bushy tail, which is completely filled in. Figure 9 can be compared with a similar yak in silhouette from the Nubra Valley in Ladakh. Both Fig. 9 and the Ladakh depiction have similar body shapes, long, almost closed horns, and a round-shaped tail, which is a stylistic feature characteristic of Bronze Age yak depictions from Central Asia (Bruneau et al. 2011, p. 93). The body of the yak in Fig. 10 is rectangular with short legs; all four legs are not distinguishable. Figure 10 can be compared with a similar yak outline from Langar in nearby Tajikistan (Ranov 2001, Fig. 16). The two figures, despite their differences, share a significant stylistic attribute. Neither yak has long horns protruding forward, a characteristic they share with the yak depictions at Langar and Nubra and which sets them apart from yak depictions elsewhere in Central Asia (Ranov 2001, pp. 136, 143).

Figures 9 and 10, although composed in different styles, both depict the animal in a reduced, more stylized form, with prominent features (horns, tail) appearing in slightly exaggerated scale. Wild yaks were important animals that would have provided meat, hair, horns and burnable dung for people entering Wakhan. Yaks would have formed a vital component of a hunting economy and their depictions in rock art may have had symbolic significance. A fuller contextual study of the large rock art field where these two figures are located would be useful to analyzing the symbolic dimension. It is noteworthy that Fig. 9 appears to be more repatinated than Fig. 10, which could indicate greater age. The difference in technique (outline vs. silhouette) noted above may also be significant in attributing age.

Figure 11, next page (Color Plate IIIb) depicts an ibex hunt. Two ibex are depicted in outline and two hunters, also in outline, aim bows at the ibex. The uppermost hunter is drawing a long bow with curved bow tips, which appears to represent a composite bow. The second hunter, standing behind the ibex



Fig. 9 & Fig. 10. Wild yaks, lower Wakhan.

*Fig. 11. Ibex and ibex hunters with dogs. The photo has been desaturated and the contrast enhanced to show the figures clearly. See also Color Plate IIIb.*

on the right of the figure, is also drawing what appears to be a bow with curved tips. Between the two ibex and below the first hunter are two zoomorphs with long tails and short ears. They are depicted facing the second ibex, and may represent canids. Use of dogs for hunting ibex is widely depicted throughout Central Asia (Ranov 2001, p. 146) and is also known from Ladakh (Francfort et al. 1990, pp. 8, 11). These images were executed with some precision, suggesting that the entire composition was planned and executed at the same time. It would have taken several days to complete. It is substantially repatinated, which suggests considerable age. It is probably not a medieval composition, but rather an earlier composition by hunters who employed dogs and used composite bows.

Figure 12 also depicts an ibex hunt, with hunters on foot using bows. The hunter in the upper left has a long bow, but the hunter in the middle has a shorter bow. There is insufficient detail and clarity to ascertain if the bows depicted are simple or compound bows. The hunter in the middle appears to have something hanging between his legs, but the lack of detail makes it impossible to ascertain if it is clothing, a weapon, or even an exaggerated phallus. The hunters are in silhouette, with their heads completely filled in, and their arms and legs are articulated much more than stick-like figures. The upper



ibex is depicted in outline, with two curving horns. There appears to be a small zoomorph above the ibex, which could be a dog, but is not clear. The depictions are weathered and significantly repatinated, suggesting considerable age and are likely much older than medieval compositions. Although similar to Fig. 11 in composition, they are stylistically different.

Two other compositions depict mounted riders and accompanying men on foot. The panel shown in Fig. 13 depicts five riders; four on horses and one on a camel. Two of the horse riders and the camel rider appear to wear headgear, which could be hats or turbans. All the mounts appear to have reins and bridles, and each rider has one hand holding the reins and

*Fig. 12 (left). Ibex hunters on foot with bows.*

*Fig. 13. (right) Four equestrians and one camel rider.*

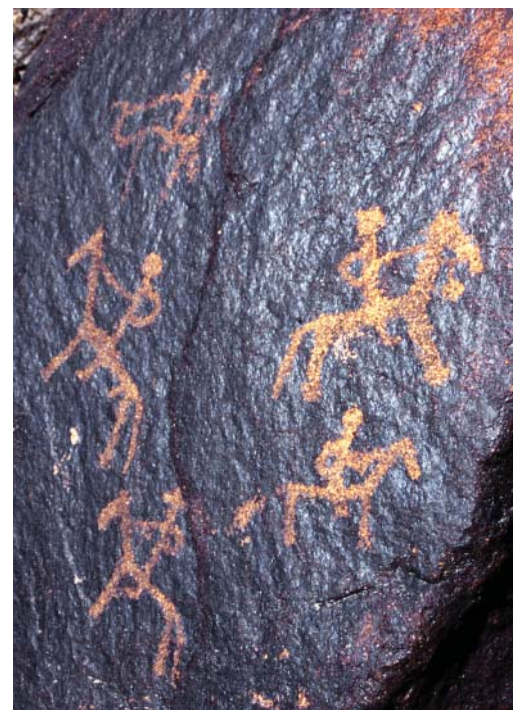
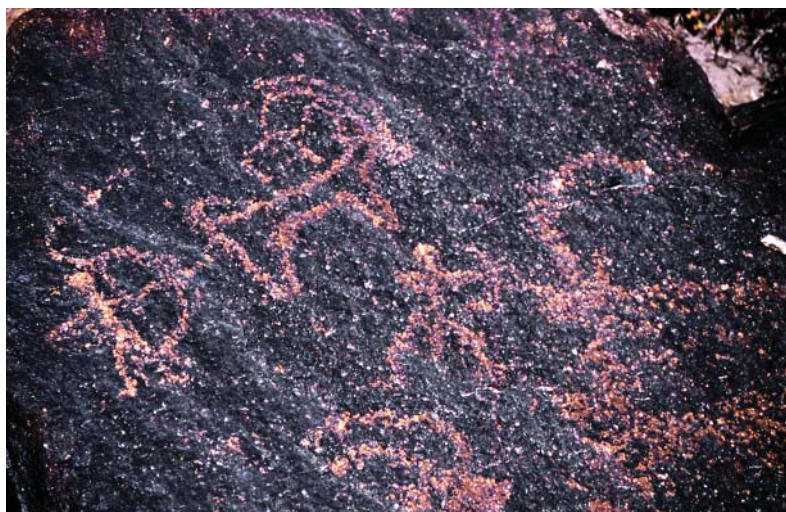




Fig. 14. Equestrian accompanied by pedestrians.

the other hand curved back to touch the waist. The upper right horse shows the bridle most clearly, and the horse has what appears to be a round bag hanging from its neck. This may be an ornament, or perhaps a small feedbag. The feet of the riders appear to be horizontal, as though in stirrups. Ranov, citing Boris Litvinskij, notes that stirrups appeared in Central Asia in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Ranov 2001, p. 127), which provides a *terminus post quem* for this panel. The execution of the panel is more precise and distinct than that of riders from Vybist-Dara, Tajikistan (Ranov 2001, Fig 19), which Ranov dated from the Kushano-Hephthalite period.

The panel shown in Fig. 14 (Color Plate IVa) depicts a horse rider accompanied by two men on foot, one in front and one behind, as though they are escorts of the rider. The panel is an interesting palimpsest with a paler ibex depicted above the reddish-brown repatinated horse rider and escorts scene. The differing degrees of repatination offer comparative dating. Ranov has categorized repatination of Tajikistan rock art into three grades, P-1, P-2 and P-3 (Ranov 2001, p. 126). P-1 is almost completely repatinated, indicative of the oldest compositions. P-2 is reddish-brown in color and P-3 is lighter, almost white and indicative of more recent composition. The rider and escorts in this panel show P-2 repatination, and the ibex above shows P-3. As with the riders depicted in Fig. 13, bridle and reins are shown, as is the round bag or ball beneath the horse's neck. All the men are wearing headgear, which appear to be hats or thick turbans, and the two escorts are carrying objects. The lead escort may have an axe, and the rear escort has what at first glance may suggest a rifle with a stock, but the repatination and comparative dating mentioned above would rule out a firearm, although the object cannot be readily identified. This panel would seem to show a scene of travelers along the "Silk Road." Further investigation

into the horse gear, such as the distinctive round ball or bag, and the headgear styles may reveal more information about the identity of these travelers and help to establish a more accurate chronology.

### Shrine Rock gallery

Shrine Rock is also located in the settled area of Wakhan along the Wakhan River. The rock sits on a low terrace that appears to have once been a lake bed. The rock art at this site is a single large panel, here shown in a composite from three separate photos (Fig. 15, next page). The panel depicts eleven horse riders, two of whom are leading horses. The degree of repatination, using Ranov's scale (discussed above), is between P-2 and P-1. That is, the depictions show only light reddish-brown color. Stylistically, they are comparable with the riders from the Mud Place gallery (Figs. 13, 14). Most of the riders wear headgear, which appears more turban-like than hat-like. The horses all have bridles and the riders hold reins. The horses also have the small round ball or bag under their necks, which is linked into the horse tack. The two horses being led by riders on the left reveal the most detail and definitely appear to have saddles on their backs.

Interspersed among the riders are ibex, which have the same degree of repatination as the riders and horses, indicating they were composed at about the same time. However one horse and rider, right of center, is clearly composed over an ibex, indicating that the ibex depiction antedates the horse and rider. Three riders have one hand raised behind them and two of them are holding something in that hand. It is not clearly depicted, but brings to mind Kyrgyz hunters who use eagles and hold them in a similar way. However, this is only speculation at this preliminary stage. Two men on foot are shown in the panel. One is at the far right of the panel and holds a bow. The other human, more crudely drawn with an oval head and holding a bow, is above the left side of the panel. Also noteworthy is the long-tailed zoomorph at the upper right of the panel, which can probably be identified as a snow leopard, indigenous to Wakhan.

At the top center of the panel is a shield-like device, divided into quadrants, with a dot in each quadrant. In discussing similar circles from Langar in Tajikistan, Ranov mentions that although their symbolic significance is obscure, perhaps linked to Buddhist *cakra* or perhaps to anti-Buddhist solar symbolism, their dating is undoubtedly the 8<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Ranov 2001, pp. 145–46).



Fig. 15. The Shrine Rock panel.

Fig. 16. Hunter, ibex, swastika, lunar crescent; Color Plate IVb.

### Big Rock gallery

The Big Rock site is located at an elevation of 4000m, well above and beyond the settled areas of Wakhan and near summer pasture areas used by Wakhi herders. The site shows evidence of Tibetan usage (Mock 2013a) that dates to the Tibetan Imperial period, most likely to the latter half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Older rock art at the site depicts ibex, yaks and a hunter with a spear (Fig. 16). Rock carvings that depict ibex, argali sheep, yaks, and humans holding spears or bows are among the earliest rock art of Central Asia. Such rock art hunting





Fig. 17. Wild yak, Big Rock site, Wakhan District.

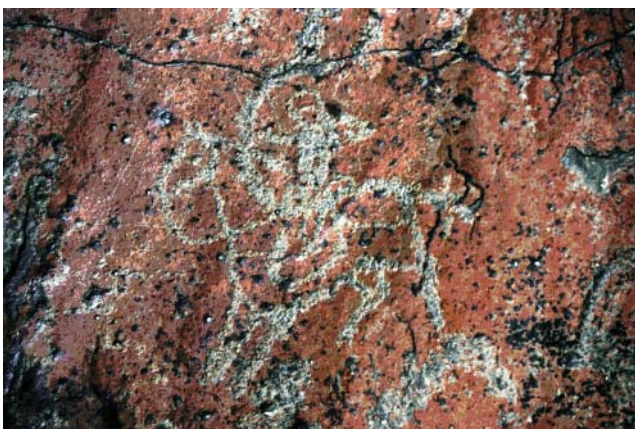
scenes are widely found throughout Central Asia and probably were related to ritual practices that ensured hunting success (Dodykhudoeva 2004, pp. 151–52; Hauptmann 2007, pp. 24–25; Bellezza 2008, p. 173).

The panel at the Big Rock site (Fig. 16) shows a hunter holding a spear, several ibex, a yak, and a large ibex with exaggeratedly long curving horns and clearly depicted hooves. The excessively large size of this ibex suggests a ritual function for the art, which is further indicated by a reverse (counter-clockwise) swastika above the ibex and a crescent moon beneath it, both symbols closely associated with pre-Buddhist traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 17 depicts a large wild yak, with four legs, a massive body, a bushy tail, and a raised head with curved horns extending upward, not a lowered head with horns protruding forward. The yak is depicted in silhouette. It is pecked into the glacially polished surface of a large boulder. The yak is not being hunted. Rather, like Figs. 9 and 10, it may be a symbolic depiction of a wild yak.

Figure 18, from the same boulder as Fig. 17, depicts a rider on horseback aiming a bow and is a depiction

Fig. 18. Equestrian shooting from a bow, Big Rock site.



of skillful riding. The depiction is mostly in outline. The edges of the pecking appear sharper and better defined than those of Fig. 17, indicating a different and possibly more recent composition. The rider uses a long single bow rather than a composite bow. The rider appears to wear a headdress or hat, perhaps a helmet. The horse has a bridle and a saddle. The foot position of the rider suggests stirrups although they are not depicted, which, as previously noted, is significant for dating. The trapezoidal figure on which the rider sits on the back of the horse is suggestive of the shape of a saddle carpet or felt. These elements<sup>21</sup> suggest that this depiction may be a more recent composition than the yak in Fig. 17.



Fig. 19. (left) Three ibex in silhouette.

Fig. 20. (right) Three ibex.

### Rock Pile gallery

The Rock Pile site is located in the Pamir region at an altitude of 4000 meters. The site is on a terrace high above the Wakhan River, where a large outcrop of dark polished rock is exposed. The rock outcrop is broken into smaller boulders and most display rock art. Many of the carvings depict ibex, which, as previously noted, is the most common subject of rock art throughout Wakhan. Figures 19 and 20 depict ibex, but in notably different styles. The panel shown in Fig. 19 depicts three ibex in silhouette. The top ibex has two legs, a short tail, a long neck, curved horns and outstretched legs, as though running or leaping. Below it is another ibex whose horns, depicted as a single horn, seem to fit into the space between the front and rear legs of the upper ibex. This middle ibex also has two legs, a short tail, a long neck, and appears to show a slight beard. It is unclear if the upper ibex is depicted with a beard or not. Below the middle ibex is a small ibex that is not as well defined as the upper two ibex. The front legs of the lower ibex are shorter than its

rear legs, perhaps as though leaping. All three seem to form a unified composition with the same style of execution, form of depiction and degree of repatination. The whole composition and spacing of the three ibex suggests a group of ibex running or jumping together and can be compared to similar ibex depictions from the Aq Jilga site in the Tajikistan Pamir (Ranov 2001, pp. 132–38).

The panel shown in Fig. 20 depicts three ibex. The top left ibex is depicted in outline, with four legs and large curved horns that appear to join at the end. It is facing another ibex that is depicted in silhouette (partially cut off in the figure). The horns of both ibex are exaggeratedly long, and those of the top left ibex are very exaggerated as though emphasizing this aspect of the animal. Ibex horns are associated with spirituality and even today are often placed at religious shrines.<sup>22</sup> Below the top left ibex is a small stick-figure ibex showing two straight legs and a downward-curving tail. Its head merges with the front legs of the upper ibex. The degree of repatination of all three ibex is similar, suggesting they were composed at about the same time, although they are all in different styles.



Fig. 21. Two yaks, Afghan Pamir site.

Figures 21–23 depict yaks in silhouette, with the body fully inscribed. They share the stylistic motif of massive depiction of the animals, seemingly emphasizing strength and power. The two yak depictions shown in Fig. 21 are similar in style and composition.<sup>23</sup> Both depict a yak in silhouette, with head lowered and curved horns prominent in front, a similarity they share with wild yak depictions from southern Siberia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan (Ranov 2001, p. 143). Both show the characteristic bushy tail

and the large shoulder hump of the powerful animal. The upper figure shows four legs, but the lower figure shows only two legs. The lower figure has a darker color, closer to that of the surrounding rock, suggesting more repatination than the upper figure. Hence, although the depictions are stylistically similar, the lower figure, due to the degree of repatination, appears to be older than the upper figure. Below the upper yak and in front of the lower yak is a depiction of another animal. It is lighter in color than either yak, showing less repatination. The long tail is not typical of an ungulate, nor is the elongated muzzle. It may be a wolf, which is a common animal on the Pamir. Behind the upper yak is a rider on horseback. The depiction is not detailed and the execution is less precise than that of the yak, suggesting that it may have been composed separately rather than being a unified, contemporaneous hunting scene depiction.

The panel shown in Fig. 22 depicts two yaks in profile silhouette. The lower yak is several times larger than the upper yak, although both yaks are stylistically and compositionally similar. Both yaks show four legs. Their bushy tails are not exaggerated in size, and are not raised high, but rather extend rearward. Their heads are lowered and their horns extend forward. The horns of the lower yak appear in a full circle and those of the upper yak may also be in a full circle, but a fracture line in the rock surface makes this difficult to discern. A large fracture line runs through the rear portion of both figures and shows lichen growth, indicating that the depictions were made before the fracturing occurred. Fracturing is a feature of weathering, especially in a

Fig. 22. Two yaks, Afghan Pamir site.

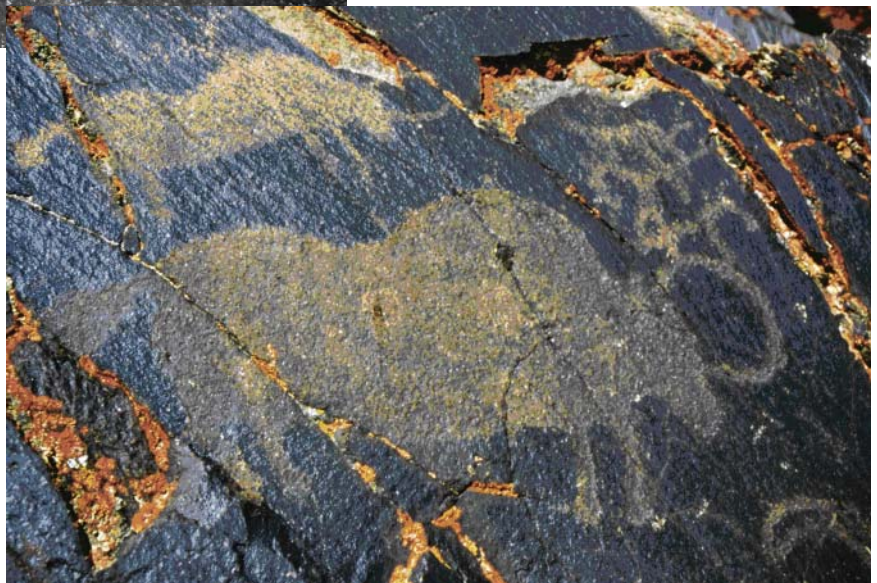




Fig. 23. Yak, Afghan Pamir site.

high altitude environment subject to extremes of heat and cold. Above the horn of the lower yak are several outline drawings of what appear to be ungulates – perhaps big horn sheep, which are resident in the Pamir. The massive stylistic quality of both yaks is remarkable and seems to emphasize the power and strength of the animals.

The panel shown in Fig. 23 depicts a large yak in profile silhouette. The yak has its head lowered and its large curved horns forward, as though in a defensive or aggressive posture. The horns, like those in Fig. 22, appear to be in a full circle. The depiction shows only two legs. The characteristic bushy tail extends rearward, and a fracture line obscures the final portion of the tail. The depiction appears to be heavily repatinated, but clearly shows the pecking technique which was employed. Several other symbols appear on the panel, but they have no obvious significance or relation to the yak. The massive quality of this yak figure emphasizes the strength of the animal.

The panel shown in Fig. 24 is a palimpsest and depicts two large yaks in profile. They are composed in silhouette. Both depictions show four legs, lowered heads with horns thrust forward and raised bushy tails. Although they are in silhouette, with the interior pecked, the outer edge of each figure appears to be more strongly pecked than the interior. This is especially true of the upper yak, which has a fully defined silhouette head and horns. The tail is also strongly defined, but shows some repatination. This style of composition is comparable to that found at the Aq-Jilga site (3800m) in the Pamir region of Tajikistan. Ranov (2001, p. 126) described the technique as “first the contour of the drawing was carved with a sharp object, then its inner side became shaded ... and then sometimes ground down ... [so that] their color didn’t differ from that of the surface.” Ranov noted that this technique appeared unique for the Pamirs. Ranov (2001, p. 137) commented that the manner of representing a yak, in which “a massive body presents a contrast to a small head and thin legs,” is unique and



Fig. 24. Wild yak palimpsest, Afghan Pamir.

is not found elsewhere in Central Asia. The yaks in Fig. 24 best exemplify these Pamir characteristics and so can be linked to the Aq-Jilga site in adjacent Tajikistan, which Ranov tentatively dates to the “very beginning of the first millennium BC.”

In the center of the upper yak is an ibex figure, with exaggeratedly large curving horns. Above the back and head of the upper yak and above the head of the lower yak are thinly inscribed smaller ibex figures. Below the lower yak is another animal, difficult to identify. It may be an ungulate, as there is a suggestion of curving horns, but the repatination makes it obscure. The repatination of the main animal figures appears equal. The overlay of a stylized ibex on the body of the massive yak is an intriguing palimpsest, showing important game animals of the Pamir.

The panel shown in Fig. 25 depicts two argali heads, head on, which are readily identified by the distinctive shape of the horns. Argali, commonly known as Mar-

Fig. 25. Ibex, argali heads, anthropomorph.



co Polo sheep, are big horn sheep indigenous to the Pamir and were described in the account of Polo's 13<sup>th</sup> century travels through the Pamir (Polo 1871). The depiction of argali is less common in Wakhan than that of ibex, and this head-on depiction is unusual. Argali horns also decorate shrines in Wakhan, and argali are associated with the spiritual world. The argali in this panel are depicted with ears and have central "antenna-like" protrusions from the middle of their heads and a single dot on their foreheads. These last two elements make them seem "tamgha-like"<sup>24</sup> and suggest a symbolic or spiritual significance to the depictions.

The panel also has an ibex in silhouette at the lower left, and below the upper argali head is an anthropomorph, with arms outstretched. It is weathered and difficult to see clearly. To the right of the anthropomorph is an unidentifiable figure, almost like a torso, but not recognizable. All of the rock art in this panel is very weathered and repatinated, suggesting considerable age.

The panel shown in Fig. 26 depicts an unusual and stylized anthropomorph, whose round outline head has two eyes. From the body-right side of the head is a zig-zag line. The rock panel is broken on body-left side of the head, and if there was a corresponding zig-zag line, it is now gone.<sup>25</sup> The anthropomorph has a longish neck and two arms that are bilaterally symmetrical and have zig-zag angular bends that parallel the line coming from the head. The part that would be the hands is very long, and neither hands nor fingers are depicted. The body or torso is depicted in silhouette with a tapered waist. The legs extend to the knees, but the knees bend backwards, almost as though squatting, or sitting with legs spread. Such a posture cannot readily be depicted on a two-dimensional rock surface. From the waist (body left) is a line extending out, with a thick part at its end, but the rock is broken, and whatever may have existed beyond is lost.<sup>26</sup> Extending down between the legs is a line, but it bifurcates to form an oval, open (uncarved) in the center. The oval connects with an unusual design of two circle outlines, with a dot in the middle of one and a swirl or half circle in the middle of the other. These are connected by a horizontal line that joins the oval shape mid-line, with a vertical line descending down from the center of this horizontal line. The inner part of each circle design descends as though forming legs.



Fig. 26. Anthropomorph with rays from head.

Although this lower figure displays bilateral symmetry, it is not identifiable as either an anthropomorph or a zoomorph. One could ascribe sexual symbolism to a phallus connecting to the oval shape, but the odd angularity of the upper human design suggests a ritual or possibly shamanic function.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan's remote, high altitude Wakhan District has retained numerous rock art sites. The sites have remained largely unknown and undisturbed due in large part to the difficulty of visiting the area. On the basis of stylistic and content comparison with other, more well-studied high mountain sites in Central Asia and South Asia, the sites appear to date from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age and into the modern historical era. The rock carvings range in altitude from

areas that are now permanently settled to areas that, due to high altitude, could only be used seasonally. The human usage depicted evidences hunting of wild game (ibex, argali, yaks) and trans-regional trade that followed what has become known as the Silk Road. These depictions portray the progression of human usage of Wakhan.

The rock art also provides data on the symbolic concepts of the high mountain Pamir-Hindukush regions. From early visitors to current residents, continuing concepts of the spiritual world are evidenced in the rock art and shrines of Wakhan. This continuing dynamic concept is characteristic of the Pamir-Hindukush-Karakoram region and demonstrates linkages to concepts of shamanic people of the steppes of Central Asia.

The people who left rock art records in Afghanistan's Wakhan and Pamir, by comparison of their rock art, may be linked to hunters of the Eurasian steppe and subsequent Scythian/Saka nomads. Were some compositions made by the early nomadic hunter-gatherer groups that moved into the Pamir following the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), 14,000-10,000 years ago, that is, at the start of the Holocene? At this point, without any excavation that might reveal tools or a faunal record, it is impossible to say. Malassé and Gaillard (2011) show that the early mountainous hunters disappeared from the Pamir region 5000-4000 years ago, as the region grew more arid and the bio-



diversity necessary for their lifestyle decreased. They also note a concurrent rise in a pastoralist lifestyle. Did the nomadic hunters begin to settle and adopt a transhumant lifestyle? Did Wakhan have more extensive forest cover in the first half of the Holocene that was burned to establish rangelands, as Miede et al. have proposed for the southern flanks of the Hindukush-Himalaya and the Tibetan plateau (Miede et al. 2009a; 2009b)? Without pollen and charcoal studies we cannot know. Were some of the compositions made by Bronze Age people that were part of the “mobile pastoralist network” moving within the “Inner Asian Mountain Corridor” (Frachetti 2012) or more specifically, Andronovo people utilizing transhumant herding to exploit the Pamir ecological niche (Kuzmina 2008, pp. 63–64)? Again, without excavation to reveal a faunal record or lithic or metal industries that can be associated with known cultural periodization, we cannot know. In the adjacent Pamir region of Tajikistan, chariots depicted in the “from above” perspective have been described from the Aq-Jilga site (Ranov) and linked to Andronovo people (Kuzmina 2008, p. 57). Despite the proximity and similarity of landscape, so far we have found no chariot depictions in Wakhan. Such depictions are unknown after the early Iron Age (Jacobson-Tepfer 2012), and suggest the Aq-Jilga depictions were made by Saka people at the beginning of the first millennium BCE (Ranov 2001). The presence of Saka people in Wakhan seems probable, based on stylistic elements of the rock art that suggest composition by Scythian/Saka people venturing into the Pamir for hunting. Depictions of skillful horse riding and archery, i.e., shooting a composite bow while riding at full gallop, strongly suggest Saka/Scythian presence. Although the evidence of Saka culture is widespread in the Tajikistan Pamir region, specific archaeological evidence to support this attribution of stylistic elements of the rock art has not been located in Wakhan. Even so, the rock art evidence from Wakhan and the Pamir supports the hypothesis of a circulation of Scythian/Saka people from Eurasia into the upper Indus regions of present-day Pakistan (Gilgit-Baltistan) and India (Ladakh).

We would also like to know when wild yaks became extinct in Wakhan and to what extent improved weaponry and horsemanship contributed to their extinction. Faunal remains at old hunting camps would help answer this ecological question. The realization that Bronze Age hunters and herders utilized the same routes, water sources and mountain passes that were used by travelers along the historical Silk Roads (Kuzmina 2008, pp. 64, 108) leads us to suppose that historical sites in Wakhan may overlay prehistoric and proto-historic sites. The rock art record at several Pamir sites indicates a long period of human usage.

In Wakhan, the historical Tibetan material can be dated with a relative degree of accuracy to the mid-seventh through mid-eighth centuries CE with the numerous depictions of riders on horses equipped with saddles and bridles following in sequence after the Tibetan period. Lichenometric comparative studies might help ascertain the chronology of the historical art.

The rock art and other archaeological material of Afghanistan’s Wakhan and Pamir has neither been thoroughly studied nor documented. On-site research, including pollen and radiocarbon studies, would contribute greatly to the important theoretical questions mentioned above. This article presents a preliminary survey of the prehistoric and protohistoric rock art of Wakhan and the Pamir. Altogether, this preliminary study indicates that Afghanistan’s Wakhan and Pamir regions would richly reward further research to reveal the ecological and cultural heritage of the Roof of the World.

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## Notes

1. Wakhan was the last settled region before crossing the Pamir from west to east, and the first settled region reached when crossing from east to west. Villages in Wakhan today range from 2600 to 3270 meters in altitude and are located along side streams flowing into the main Panj River. This article addresses the part of Wakhan within Afghanistan, where it constitutes the district (*woluswoli*) of Wakhan.

2. For more on the history of the Silk Road and routes through the Pamir, see Barfield 1989, Beckwith 2009, Grousset 1970, Waugh 2010, Whitfield 2004, Zelinsky 1965. For a summary of exploration in the Pamir, with useful maps, see Middleton and Thomas 2008.

3. The Tang Annals were translated into French by Édouard Chavannes and first published in 1903. The Old Tibetan Annals (OTA), interestingly, were obtained by Stein on this expedition. Subsequent scholarship utilizing these and other sources has produced more detailed analysis. See Beckwith 1987 and Denwood 2009. See Dotson 2009 for an annotated new translation of the OTA.

4. This was Stein's second Central Asian journey, recounted in Stein 1912, pp. 63–88, and Stein 1921, pp. 60–72. His conclusions regarding the famous 747 CE battle between the Tibetans and the Chinese are in Stein 1922.

5. See Ferrandi 2010 for an overview of rock art in Afghanistan and the Hindukush, in which he notes the research lacunae for Wakhan and the Pamir. Research expeditions in the 1970s largely focused on geology and natural history, with brief mentions of rock art and cultural heritage. See Agresti 1970; Naumann 1973; Dor 1974; Gratzl et al. 1978; Petocz 1978.

6. For more on Scythian/Saka mastery of horse riding, see Davis-Kimball et al. 1995, pp. 193–95. A 'Scythian' bow is depicted in Artamonov 1974, Pl. 44. Scythian/Saka presence in the Pamir in the 8<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE is discussed in Davis-Kimball et al. 1995, p. 235, and Litvinskij 2002. Jettmar (2002, pp. 96–101) and Hauptmann (2007, pp. 26–28) provide a chronology placing Saka/Scythians in the Gilgit and Pamir regions in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE.

7. Repatination of rock art, that is, the gradual return of the weather-induced patina, is a physical indicator of age. The more the art is repatinated, the older it is. Stylistic elements are also useful indicators of age. For a thorough discussion of Central Asian rock art see Tashbayeva 2001, especially the section on petroglyphs of Tajikistan by Vadim A. Ranov (Tashbayeva 2001, pp. 122–48), which includes the Langar

site on the north (right) bank of the Panj river in Wakhan.

8. Pamirs are high-elevation U-shaped valleys, distinctive to Central Asia.

9. Initial human foraging in the comparable high altitude Tibetan Plateau is attested from at least the Late Paleolithic (13,000 calendar years BCE) (Madsen et al. 2006; Rhode et al. 2007; Aldenderfer 2011).

10. Although Paleolithic tools dating to about 800,000 BCE have been found in loess deposits in southern Tajikistan, "the region may have been largely uninhabited during the Last Glacial Maximum and sites dating from 34,000 – 14,000 BCE are virtually unknown" (Davis and Ranov 1999, p. 186).

11. Composite bows are often termed Scythian bows (Reisinger 2010). The Scythians were masters of mounted archery and dominated the central Eurasian steppe region for much of the first millennium BCE (Barfield 1989, pp. 46–51; Beckwith 2009, pp. 58–70; Davis-Kimball et al. 1995, pp. 193–95). Access to the Pamir grasslands and wild game was undoubtedly made easier by horse riding and yak hunting made easier by the compact, powerful compound bow. For more on horses and the development of riding by steppe people, see Anthony 2007, Di Cosmo 2002 and Drews 2004.

12. See Mock and O'Neil 2004 for a report on 2004; Mock and O'Neil 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a for results of 2005; Mock and O'Neil 2007b and Mock 2011b for results from 2006 and 2007; and Mock 2011a for results from 2006–10.

13. For studies of the archaeology of the Tibetan Empire in Wakhan see Mock 2013a, 2013b, 2013c.

14. No chronology has been established for Wakhan. Rock art may date to the Bronze Age, or even earlier to the beginning of the Holocene. See the discussion at the conclusion of this article.

15. Wakhan, like the rest of Afghanistan, is subject to iconoclasm, digging and looting. The sites discussed in this article have not been fully documented or studied and no excavation has been done. Until and when such work is complete, I have chosen not to reveal publicly the actual locations and instead have used English translations of the Wakhi and Kyrgyz toponyms. I am happy to communicate more specifically with interested scholars and welcome collaboration.

16. The Indus river system links Ladakh with the Gilgit-Baltistan region of modern Pakistan, where the joint Pakistani-German project begun by Karl Jettmar and continued by Harald Hauptmann has identified over 30 sites, 30,000 petroglyphs and 5,000 inscriptions. This is documented in two series: *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan* (ANP, five volumes), providing selected specialized articles on the subject, and *Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans* (Materials for the Archaeology of the Northern Regions of Pakistan – MANP, nine volumes) which is devoted to the publication of complete rock art sites in monographs. For more information see <<http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~u71/kara/intro.html>>.

17. This dark patination can be correlated with strongly varnished boulders typical of the nearby Batura (Hunza Valley) glacier advance period of the early Holocene, 10.8–9.0 ka BPE (Owen et al. 2002).

18. Currently, wild yaks (*bos mutus*) are found only in a small part of Ladakh and in the Chinese provinces of Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang (Buzzard et al. 2010; Fox et al. 2004; Harris and Leslie 2008; Schaller 1998). Domesticated yaks (*bos grunniens*), however, are kept by both Wakhi and Kyrgyz residents of Wakhan (Shahrani 1979).

19. An early European description typifies their habitat: "The wild yak occurs on the Tibetan Plateau at elevations of 3,000–5,500 m, where it inhabits the coldest, wildest, and most desolate mountains" (Blanford 1888, p. 491).

20. See John Bellezza's website <<http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/september-2010/>> for images and additional discussion of the pre-Buddhist significance of these symbols. I am grateful to John for reading several drafts of this article and offering useful comments and expert advice.

21. The "Ambassadors' Painting," a Samarkand mural painting from an aristocratic house in the ancient city of Afrasiab, dated to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century CE, attests to these elements of horse gear in Central Asia. See Whitfield 2004, pp. 110–11.

22. See Mock 2011a, p. 122, for specific discussion of ibex horns at shrines. See also Mock 1998, pp. 45–46, for a broader discussion of the association of wild ungulates with the spiritual world throughout the Pamir-Hindukush region.

Shatskiy 1966, p. 112, discusses the sacred significance of wild ungulate horns in ancient Central Asia.

23. Ronald Petocz published a photograph of a similar yak depiction from the Waghjir (Wakhjir) valley of Afghanistan's Little Pamir (Petocz 1978, p. 21).

24. Tamgha and tamgha-like rock art found in the Pamir and upper Indus have been ascribed to Sogdians. See Passarelli 2010, pp. 74–75, for discussion. Tamgha are well-known as clan symbols and carpet motifs among Turkmen and Mongol people.

25. "Schematic, anthropomorphic figures with rays on their heads are a particular feature of Siberian and Central Asian rock art. Their bodies may be curvilinear, and some of them are missing legs or hands, but they are always depicted with rays either on the head or even replacing it" (Devlet 2001, p. 50). Devlet suggests such figures represent shamanic or supernatural beings.

26. Human figures with a rod extending from the waist and ending in a ball, identified as a mace, have been studied in the Altai, Xinjiang and Ladakh (Francfort et al. 1990, pp. 3–5) and ascribed to the Bronze Age. Jacobson-Tepfer (2012, pp. 4 and 12), however, identifies the Altai rock-art depictions of these objects as daluur, "usually made of yak hair or foxtail mounted on a stick and used in hunting small animals to distract the intended prey."



a



b

Plate IV



a



b



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## Shrine Traditions of Wakhan Afghanistan

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### Abstract

This study, based on field work from 2004 to 2010, describes the religious, social and historical context of shrines in Wakhan District of Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan. Scholarly analysis of the significance of the shrines is balanced with the perspective of the people of Wakhan for whom the shrine traditions are part of a living landscape. Translated excerpts from interviews conducted in the Wakhi language at the shrines bring the Wakhi voice to the study, which focuses on one shrine (the shrine of the miracle of Nāser Khosrow in Yimit village) as an exemplar of shrine traditions. The study draws comparisons between documented shrine traditions in adjacent Wakhan Tajikistan and in Hunza-Gojal of Pakistan, locates the traditions within Pamir Ismaʿilism, and suggests outlines of a broader Pamir interpretive community.

### Keywords

Wakhan, Afghanistan, Pamir, Ismaʿilism, saints, shrines, religion

*The people of Wakhan consider all Wakhan as a ring and Khandut as its nagina ("jewel").*

Religious scholar Gholām ʿAli of Qāzideh

It is generally accepted that the development of Pamir Ismaʿilism involved the absorption of local customs and traditions (Dodykhudoeva, 151; Iloliev 2008b, 64). From the perspective of a cultural focal area, it may equally be said that the culture of Wakhan (Vakhān) and the Pamir assimilated Ismaʿili and Sufi concepts as it had assimilated previous concepts and traditions. In effect, the Pamir and, of particular emphasis for this paper, Wakhan are a sort of

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cultural palimpsest, a recipient of a complex series of influences. The process, however, should not be viewed as unidirectional.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Wakhan and the Pamir participate in an ethno-linguistic area that is also an interpretive area, where neighboring communities share significant features of meaning that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.<sup>3</sup> The diachronous threads of history and tradition weave together with the synchronous threads of interpersonal and intercommunity relations to form the broader social fabric of the region, in which the predominant interpretive mode today is that of Isma'ili and Sufi thought, in a distinctive form that is called Pamir Isma'ilism.

### Historical and Cultural Threads

For more than a thousand years, a fairly steady stream of merchants, monks, travelers, and occasionally armies passed through Wakhan along the so-called Silk Road<sup>4</sup> from at least the first century BCE (Franck, 2; Zelinsky, 54). The religious traditions that came with these travelers include Zoroastrianism (from Samarkand and Sogdiana to the north and west), Buddhism (from Balur just to the south, Kabul and Balkh to the west, and Khotan to the east), Manichaeism, and Nestorianism (both from the west via Sogdiana).<sup>5</sup>

Numerous rock carvings demonstrate a human presence in Wakhan from the prehistoric Bronze Age, when wild yaks were hunted by mounted bowmen on the Pamir, to the first millennium CE (Hauptmann, 24-28; Middleton and Thomas, 600-06; Mock and O'Neil 2005, 13; Miller, 54-59; Naumann 1973, 252). Many of the rock carvings depict wild game animals and hunters, and may have been part of ceremonial or ritual practices (Hauptmann, 25). Rock carvings of wild goats in the Scythian animal style can be associated with seventh century BCE Saka people resident in the Pamir (Litvinsky, 148). Whatever the original cultural relevance of these rock carvings, it is unknown to today's inhabitants, who have told me that the rock carvings were "made by *fereshta* (angel[s])."

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<sup>2</sup> The dialogical process of incorporation of indigenous tradition into Islamic discourse and nativization of outside (Islamic) tradition into indigenous discourse is a well-known Central Asia phenomenon. See DeWeese 1994, 445-46.

<sup>3</sup> Shared features of the Pamir, Dardic, and Nuristani languages define a Pamir-Hindukush ethnolinguistic region (Payne 1989, 420-23) that is a transitional zone between South Asia and Central Asia (Tikkanen 1995).

<sup>4</sup> This trade route was termed *die Seidenstrasse* by Baron Ferdinand von Richtofen in the nineteenth century, although Chinese silk had been traded along the route from its inception.

<sup>5</sup> The scholarly essays in Whitfield 2004 elucidate the historical currents generated by trade, travel, war, and religion on the Silk Road.

People speaking Eastern Iranian languages have lived in the vicinity of the upper Amu Darya since at least the seventh century BCE and the Pamiri languages,<sup>6</sup> most notably Wakhi, are their closest living descendants (Bailey, 68; Payne 1996, 367; Skjærvø, 370). The Wakhi language (or more accurately ‘pre-Wakhi’) was in close contact with Indic languages from very ancient times when Indic and Iranian were mutually intelligible. Wakhi has continued fairly intensive interaction with the neighboring northwestern Indic language, Khovar, up to the present (Bashir 2001, 3; Morgenstierne, 441-42).

It appears that Wakhan or *wukh watan* is the homeland of Wakhi or *wakhikwor*-speaking Wakhik people, as evidenced by the shared onomastics of the toponym,<sup>7</sup> the ethnonym and the language (Bashir 2009, 825), and that the people were part of the initial wave of Iranian settlers in the Pamir (Morgenstierne, 435). Wakhi and the modern Pamiri languages are unwritten languages. Although there is ample evidence of their long presence in the Pamir, they are not attested through texts, in contrast to their historical Eastern Iranian relatives.

Written references to Wakhan as a kingdom are found not only in the eighth century CE Tang dynasty annals, but in the ninth century *Akhhār Makka*,<sup>8</sup> the tenth-century *Hodud al-‘Ālam*,<sup>9</sup> and in the thirteenth century writings of Marco Polo.<sup>10</sup> These references all use the toponym Wakhan, underscoring the continuity of the language in its place.

By the end of the first century CE, China’s Han Dynasty was the predominant Silk Road power as far east as the Pamir, although the majority of that eastern population was not Chinese (Grousset, 41-42). Tibet emerged as a

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<sup>6</sup> None of the modern Pamiri languages spoken today are direct descendants of the historic Eastern Iranian languages (although the neighboring Yagnobi is a descendant of Sogdian). The Khotanese, Khwarazmian, and Sogdian languages are attested from texts, but these languages have died out (Bashir 2009, 857; Edelman and Dodykhudoeva, 776; Payne 1989, 422).

<sup>7</sup> The earliest confirmation of the toponym is in China’s Tang dynasty annals, which record interaction of the Tang court with the Kingdom of Wakhan in 720 and 742 CE, and a battle between Chinese and Tibetan forces in Wakhan in 747 CE. The Tang annals transcribe the name of Wakhan as Hu-k’an, and Beckwith (133 fn) notes that *Hu* would have been pronounced as /ɣwak/ in Central Asia. This would give a pronunciation of /ɣwak-kan/, remarkably close to today’s pronunciation.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Azraqi chronicles that the armies of the Caliph al-Ma’mun, under the authority of his viceroy for the east, Fazl b. Sahl, campaigned against the Kabolshāh and the Qaghan of Tibet, and defeated Wakhan around 814-15 CE (Beckwith, 160-62).

<sup>9</sup> Wakhan is mentioned as a region with “Sikashim (Ishkāshim)” as its “chief place.” Khandut (Khamdādh) is described as the location of the “idol-temples (*but-khāna-hā*) of the Wakhis,” and “on its left side is a fortress occupied by Tibetans” (Minorsky, 121).

<sup>10</sup> Polo evidently passed through Wakhan around 1273. He mentions “Vokhan... [where] the people worship Mahommet, and have a peculiar language” (Polo, 162).

major power in the seventh century CE and between 650 and 850 CE China and Tibet vied for control of the kingdom of Wakhan and of the trade route through it (Beckwith, 89-91, 123, 132-33; Stein 1922, 115-16). The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang passed through Wakhan some time shortly after 640 CE on his return from India. He mentioned the village of Khandut as the capital of Wakhan and described a Buddhist *vihara* in the center of the town (Stein 1981, 866).<sup>11</sup> This corroborates the description given in *Hodud al-'Ālam* of Khandut (Khamdādh) as the location of the *vihara* ("idol-temples") of the Wakhis with a separate Tibetan fort nearby (Minorsky, 121) and indicates that the *vihara* was not for the Tibetans (or the Chinese, or other religious travelers alone), but was part of the religious life of the indigenous (Wakhi) population. Numerous old forts (*qal'a*) in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan Wakhan, such as the fort at Panja and the forts associated with the Kafir king QaQa, date from this era or perhaps even earlier (Iloliev 2008b, 65; Miller, 37-43). The QaQa<sup>12</sup> forts are linked into the present religious fabric not as shrines or the locus of religious practice, but rather through the ascription of the defeat of the Kafir king by 'Ali, the fourth caliph succeeding the prophet of Islam. Although the army of the Caliph al-Ma'mun campaigned against the Qaghan of Tibet and defeated Wakhan around 814-15, it is historically impossible that 'Ali should have been physically involved in the campaign. These forts are located in Qāzideh and Korkut in Afghanistan and in Namadgut in Tajikistan, with additional secondary locations associated with the daughters and the general(s) of QaQa. The large fort in Qāzideh is recorded as being last occupied in the late nineteenth century (Miller, 39). The Kansir fort at Korkut dates to the eighth or ninth century and figures prominently in the battle between Chinese and Tibetan forces in 747 (Miller, 43; Mock 2008; Stein 1907, 9) (Figure 1). The Tibetans appear to have reasserted their authority in Wakhan shortly after their defeat in this battle, but by the end of the ninth century the high water mark of Buddhism in the Hindukush and Pamir had receded, the Tibetan empire no longer reached to Wakhan, and the region was increasingly influenced by Islam (Beckwith, 172; Hauptmann, 32).

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<sup>11</sup> Stein, like Wood and Olufsen before him, did not visit Khandut and the villages on the true left (southern) bank of the Panj River. Hence, Stein never actually saw the *vihara*, nor have any subsequent travelers described it.

<sup>12</sup> The legend of *Qa Qa-e jodu* and his fort at Hissar near Dushanbe is well known in Tajikistan (Middleton and Thomas, 122). The legends of QaQa in Wakhan are less well known, but equally of interest. Conjecture as to any historical identity for QaQa has yet to appear in scholarly work.



Fig. 1. Kansir Fort above Korkut village

Isma‘ili missionaries were active in Samarkand and Bukhara, where the Isma‘ili message found acceptance at the Samanid court in the beginning of the tenth century (Stern, 79). Subsequent opposite reaction in Bukhara and from neighboring states induced a relocation of the Isma‘ili message into the Pamir region (Iloliev 2008a, 28). There, Isma‘ili teaching encountered the earlier magus and shaman traditions. Isma‘ilism was clearly present in the region when Nāser Khosrow (Nasir Khusraw) came to Badakhshan at the invitation of a local Isma‘ili ruler (Schadl, 72), but the Isma‘ili community today universally regards Nāser Khosrow as the founding figure.

### **Wakhan Shrine Traditions**

Wakhan is home to numerous shrines. Abdulmamad Iloliev, in his study of saints and shrines of Wakhan in Tajikistan, notes, “there are at least two or more shrines in almost every village of Wakhan” (Iloliev 2008b, 64), which is equally true for Afghanistan Wakhan. Indeed, taken as a whole, all of Wakhan would appear to match Ghulam Ali’s description of a ring (*nagina*), or as

Illiev phrases the local description of Wakhan, “the stepping place of the *pirs*” (*qadamgāh-e pīrān*).

Illiev describes three types of shrines in Tajikistan Wakhan; *oston* (standard Persian *āstān* “threshold”), *qadamgoh* (i.e. *qadamgāh* “stepping place”), and *mazar* (i.e. *mazār* “tomb”). *Oston* in Afghanistan Wakhan are typically trees, often decorated with colored strips of cloth, or a collection of stones with unique shape, color, or markings. *Qadamgohs* are places where saints reputedly visited. A rock with the mark of a footprint or the impression of a staff (*osoyi*) apparent on it may mark such sites, or a grove of trees or a spring may mark the site of a saint’s visitation. *Mazars* are typically burial places of a saint. Shrines where trees are not present often have numerous sticks, with colored cloth strips tied to them, placed around them. The horns of wild ungulates (ibex and urial) are also frequently placed at shrine sites.<sup>13</sup>

Illiev further describes three types of saint: the well-known saints of Shi‘i and Sufi tradition; the travelers and dervishes significant mostly to Pamir Isma‘ili tradition; and local *pirs* and great men or *buzurgwor* (i.e. *bozorg(a)vār*) (Illiev 2008b, 63-64). Shrines of Shi‘i and Sufi saints tend to be either *oston* or *qadamgoh*. Shrines of travelers and dervishes tend to be *qadamgoh*. Shrines of local *pirs* and *buzurgwor* tend to be *mazar*.<sup>14</sup> Not infrequently, dervish travelers and local *pirs* or *buzurgwor* have a *mazar* shrine in Wakhan along with several *qadamgoh* shrines, such as Shah Qambar-e Aftob (Āftāb), whose *mazar* is in Langar village in Tajikistan Wakhan, but who has *qadamgoh* shrines in Afghanistan Wakhan. Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor, local *pirs*, have *qadamgoh* in Sost village of Sarhadd-e Brughel but *mazar* in Langar, both in Afghanistan Wakhan.

Following Illiev’s typology, the shrines and village locations (given in parentheses) of Afghanistan Wakhan are shown below.

<sup>13</sup> Ibex and urial live in almost all of the side valleys of the Wakhi settlement area of Afghanistan Wakhan. Argali sheep live in the Pamir above the elevation of Wakhi settlements. Argali horns occasionally decorate shrines, but are heavy and must be brought from some distance. The concept of wild ungulates as “pure” creatures associated with the spiritual world is widespread throughout the Pamir-Hindukush region. See Mock 1998, 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins describes a similar typology of religious authorities in the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier region, distinguishing men of religious learning who were charismatic outsiders and indigenous religious dignitaries (Hopkins, 1462-63).



Shrines	Shi'i and Sufi	Saints Travelers and dervishes	Local <i>pirs</i> and <i>buzurgwors</i>
<i>oston (āstān)</i>	Gisu-e Hazrat Muhammad (Qāzideh) Shoh Mubarak Mard-e Wali (Shkharv) Chiltan (Paghish) Hajat Murod (Paghish) Poy-e Duldul (Khandut) Savz Pushon (Pekuy) Panja Shoh (Pinja) Bi Fotima (Gozkhun) Shoh-e Vilayat (Wardif) Khoja-e Khizer (Brughel)	Ziarat-e Shams (Kuzget)	
<i>mazar (mazār)</i>	Chihel Dukhtaron (Shkharv) Panja-e Shoh (Khandut)		Mir Khuja Aziz (Putr) Alus Malak-Fatah Ali Shoh (Khandut) Khoja Big Ali (Langar) Khoja Maribor (Langar)
<i>qadamgoh (qadamgāh)</i>	Shoh-e Najaf (Putr) Pir-e Guliston (Putr) Khoja-e Khizer (Sast) Mard-e Wali Savz Pushon (Yizik) Qadamgoh-e Ali (Ali Su, Pamir-e Bozorg)	Shoh-e Odil (Qāzideh) Nasiri Khusraw (Yimit) Khoja-e Rabon (Yimit) Shoh-e Obod (Yimit) Shohbozi Buland Parwoz (Yimit) Ziarat-e Shoh Qambar (Gozkhun) Chiroghdon-e Shoh Qambar-e Aftob (Rurung)	Khoja Shams (Qāzideh) Khoja Sheikh (Khandut) Khoja Maribor (Sost, Sarhadd-e Brughel) Khoja Big Ali (Sost, Sarhadd-e Brughel)

At shrines in Afghanistan Wakhan, one immediately notices that, unlike shrines in Tajikistan Wakhan where a process of “museumization” is the recent trend (Iloliev 2008b, 68), there is little sense of museumization. Rather, there is a sense of concealing the shrine traditions. This can be associated with *taqiya* practices among the Badakhshan Isma‘ili community and longstanding concern over hostility and discrimination by other sects of Islam (Dupree, 16; Emadi, 110-14; Schadl, 73). One corollary of such attitudes is a reported wave of looting of cultural sites during the mujahiddin period (Mock 2007). The overall fragility of cultural sites, including shrines, historic monuments and prehistoric rock carvings, is of concern given the increase of visitors, both foreign tourists and Afghan traders, since 2001 (Mock and O’Neil, 14).

At each shrine, one notices a specific place where oil or clarified butter is applied. If there is a depression in the rock, a wick may be placed in the oil/ butter and the shrine illuminated, or open oil lamps may be placed at the spot. As Iloliev notes, “shrines were constructed by believers in order to have a more direct contact with supernatural powers at the places where the saints were buried or were believed to have performed some kind of miracle... and to receive spiritual blessing (*barakat*) from them” (Iloliev 2008a, 46). Such places where the relationship with the sacred could be mediated were likely part of the indigenous belief system prior to the coming of Islam. Shrine sites are the locus for integration and assimilation of indigenous beliefs into Islamic discourse and for reaffirming and mobilizing a shared sense of the sacred in the landscape.

### Oston (Āstān) Shrines

The *oston* of Panja Shah in Qila-e Panja is an example of this category of shrine in Afghanistan Wakhan. According to the family of Nasir al-Din Shah, the great grandson of Mir Fāteh ‘Ali Shah and grandson of Mir Sarboland Shah, the shrine and *panja* stone were once located at the Qila-e Panja (i.e., *qaḷ‘a* “fort”), but were moved sometime after the end of the Mirdom of Wakhan.<sup>15</sup> A small shrine can still be found at the fort (Miller, 41), but the *oston* where offerings are made is now located near to the home of Nasir al-Din Shah. This small *oston* is decorated with some strips of colored cloth on sticks and has a stone with a hole in it that serves as the spot where offerings are placed. Nasir

<sup>15</sup> The last *mir* of Wakhan, ‘Ali Marda‘n Shah, elder son of Fāteh ‘Ali Shah, fled Wakhan along with many of his subjects in 1883. He had hosted Russian explorers and feared retribution from Kabul. In 1886, when the British Colonel Lockhart visited Wakhan, he found it under the rule of Kabul, with Gaffār Khan Kirghiz serving as governor (Alder, 193-95).

al-Din's son, Zalmay, said to the author of this article that the shrine needed to be in a less public and more protected place. The *panja* stone, which has five smooth and parallel finger-like grooves in it, is kept at Nasir al-Din's home (figs. 2 and 3). In Shi'i Islam, the number five signifies the Five Pure Persons: the Prophet Mohammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law 'Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Hosayn. In the Pamir, the Shi'i traditions blended with Sufi and Isma'ili thought to form a unique Pamir Isma'ili belief and practice called *Panj-tani*, "five bodies" (Ioliev 2008a, 41), often symbolized by a hand-print. The stone carries the same significance for today's community, but, as Zalmay stated to the author, may well pre-date the introduction of Islam in the Pamir. Its unique size and shape may have been significant for earlier beliefs.<sup>16</sup> The religious leader of Panja, Pir Shah Esmā'il, described the tradition surrounding this stone:<sup>17</sup>

The name of this village was Panja-e muborak (*mobārak* "auspicious") and not Qala-e Panja. Its earliest name is Panja-e muborak, because here is a shrine. In the middle of our mountain, there is a stone. On this stone, Hazrat 'Ali [. . .], King of men, is said to have offered prayers. The signs of his five fingers, shin, and his staff, these signs still exist. From that point, he has then rolled down/thrown a stone towards this village. The stone is like a lump, small. The five fingers of Shoh-e muborak (Shāh-e mobārak) are imprinted there on the stone. The stone has come down on top of the fort. God knows, however, if the stone has come down on the top of the fort or not. But we should not tell a lie to you. Who brought the stone to the top of the fort and where was it placed, etc.? That stone is still present. Afterwards, this name, as I described earlier, whether any infidel or someone else, I don't know that, has changed it. Afterwards, this fort was constructed here in the name of Panja-e muborak, and then they called it Qala-e Panja.

The *jamat khana*<sup>18</sup> of Khandut is located in the center of the village. Khandut is one of the oldest settlements in Afghanistan Wakhan, and is presently the district headquarters. Khandut is known from historical records as the location of a large Buddhist *vihara*, whose location has never been identified in modern scholarship. Next to the *jamat khana* and built into the wall

<sup>16</sup> The shrine Panja Shah in Chapursan Valley, a Wakhi population area in northern Pakistan that is linked to Wakhan via a pass, has a stone with five claw or finger marks, on which libations of clarified butter are offered. Similar rock marking shrines in Chapursan led Aurel Stein, who visited Chapursan in 1913, to remark on their resemblance to Buddhist rock shrines as "a case of continuity of local worship reaching back to pre-Muhammadan times" (Stein 1981, 52; Mock 1998, 308).

<sup>17</sup> This and all other narratives in this article are translated from the Wakhi language interviews recorded during fieldwork in Wakhan in 2007.

<sup>18</sup> *Jamat khana*, (Pers. *jamā'at-khāna*) the Isma'ili house of prayer, study, and community.



Fig. 2. Nasir al-Din Shah holding the Panja stone



Fig. 3. The Panja stone of Qila-e Panja

surrounding it is a small *oston* with several unique stones, some flags on sticks and wild ungulate horns, all located next to a large tree. The *oston* receives oil or butter, as indicated by the oiled appearance of the small stones. In this respect, it is similar to other shrines. However, an opening in the wall leads into a dilapidated circular structure made of sun-dried bricks, neatly arranged to form a larger base circle with an upper, smaller circle. The shape of this now-ruined structure is reminiscent of old Buddhist *vihara* found in India, and the sun dried bricks are seemingly identical with the bricks used in construction of the Kansir fort at Korkut, which dates to the eighth or ninth century CE. Could it be that these are the remains of the famous *vihara* of Khandut? Without additional archaeological study and perhaps radiocarbon dating, it must remain as speculation. However, we might assume that the location has long been linked with the sacred and that the *oston* most likely predates the *jamat khana*, demonstrating a continuation of religious practice in this location (Figure 4).<sup>19</sup>

### Mazar Shrines

Actual *mazars*—that is, burial shrines—are the least common type of shrine in Wakhan. Two are burial places of *mirs*, and one *mazar* is the burial place of two local miracle-workers, Khoja Big Ali (Khwāja Beg ‘Ali) and Khoja Maribor. Their *mazar* is at Langar, the highest elevation area that Wakhi people have cultivated. Langar is located along the upper Wakhan River, about two days’ walk above the highest permanent settlements at Sarhadd-e Brughel. There is a small house at Langar used by herders going to and from the Little Pamir.<sup>20</sup> A broken irrigation canal leading to a now untended field shows that cultivation (probably barley) once took place.

The rectangular earthen *mazar* is located on top of a ridge. It is decorated with poles on which are tied strips of colored cloth, with ibex horns and piles of small stones. A small, somewhat dilapidated mosque structure is next to the *mazar*. Along the ridge are other graves. Some graves are inside low rectangular mud walls with no roof, a style common throughout the Wakhi settlement area. There are no domed graves, which are typical of Kyrgyz burials in the Pamir. Wakhi people state that any Wakhi person who dies on the Little Pamir

<sup>19</sup> The establishment of an Islamic shrine at the place of a Buddhist shrine is attested from Thol in Nager (Hunza Valley) in northern Pakistan, which is on the ancient route from Gilgit via Hunza to Wakhan (Frembgen, 75; Stein 1907, 20).

<sup>20</sup> The Little Pamir (Wakhi Wuch Pamir, Pers. Pāmīr-e khord) is the high elevation U-shaped valley about 100 km long and 10 km wide at the eastern end of Wakhan.



Fig. 4. Khandut *oston* at Jamat Khana

is not and cannot be buried on the Pamir. Instead, the body is brought to Langar for burial.

The *mazar* is the burial place of Khoja Big Ali. His brother, Khoja Maribor, is also said to be buried there. The Khoja clan of Wakhan are the religious leaders of the Isma'ili community. They claim descent from Sayyed Sohrāb-e Vali, a fifteenth-century Isma'ili missionary of the Alamut tradition (Iloiev 2008a, 34). There is a local tradition that the Sayyed was a companion of Nāser Khosrow, although this genealogy cannot be verified, and, from the date of 1453 of Sayyed Sohrāb-e Vali's work "Thirty-six pages," it seems that the two Isma'ili missionaries were not actual historical contemporaries (Ivanov, 93, cited in Iloiev 2008a, 49). Nevertheless, the Khoja clan claims Sayyed Sohrāb-e Vali came from Yamgān, where Nāser Khosrow lived.<sup>21</sup>

Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor resided in Sost village, in the upper Wakhi settlement area of Sarhadd-e Brughel. There they met Khizer (Khezzr), the mysterious saint guide, who caused a hot spring to emerge. After meeting him, they performed miracles. Subsequently, they went to Langar and displayed more miracles. Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor have *qadamgoh* shrines, but their *mazar* in Langar is the main shrine.

The current resident of the house in Sost where the brothers performed miracles gave this narrative:

Sost is the highest of all the settlements in Wakhan. There are springs here, hot baths (*hammām*) are here. That spring here is Hazarti (Hazrat-e) Khoja Big Ali's. Hazrat Khoja Big Ali has actually seen the sight (*didor*, Pers. *didār*) here. He has seen Hazrat Khizer here. In the house where I live, that is Hazrat Khoja Big Ali's. About that house, the story is like this. Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor were brothers here in Sost. They too were people of this soil like us. They did some communal work here, for many people like this, as this brother is preparing food here. They prepared *bat*,<sup>22</sup> the *bat* of our old heritage. Then the people had eaten and for him they left some in a small bowl (*pīl*), like this. He was a bit lame of foot.

<sup>21</sup> The historical traditions of the Khoja clan are found in a book titled *Gowhar-riz*. Iloiev examined two versions of this manuscript held in private collections in Tajikistan, one in Shughnan and the other in Yamg village of Eshkāshm (Ishkashim) District (Iloiev 2008a, 11-14). I heard reference to the book in Wakhan, but did not see it. Iloiev notes that a copy is held at the Institute of Isma'ili Studies Library in London, of which Qudratbeg Elchibekov, from the Institute of Oriental Studies and Written Heritage in Dushanbe, is preparing a translation (Jo-Ann Gross, personal communication). Khoja clan members in Wakhan stated there is also a copy in northern Pakistan, most likely held by one of the religious leaders there who also claims descent from Sayyed Sohrāb-e Vali.

<sup>22</sup> *Bat* is wheat flour cooked in butter and water, with meat often added. It is served on ceremonial occasions, cooked in a large cauldron to feed many.



He said, "Hey brother! This wood beam doesn't reach; I must go to Sarhadd in order to borrow a beam. This beam doesn't reach to other side so I'll add to it." Khoja Big Ali said so to his brother Khoja Maribor. He said, "Okay, go." The others ate the food and left some for him in a small bowl (*pil*). When he reaches this spring, Hazrat Khizer comes from the other side, and he recognizes him. Khoja Maribor goes, and Khoja Big Ali encounters him. As grandpa Gulbast used to tell us, they were brothers. That is, he went to the spring, o dear! Thus, he recognizes Hazrat Khizer. After recognizing him, he gets down from the donkey. Hazrat Khizer asks, "O Khoja Big Ali! Where are you going?" He replies, "Your honor! I constructed a house, but the beam was short." Hazrat Khizer says, "Over there near your donkey's foot, water has emerged. Go and wash your face, as a spring has erupted." Hazrat Khizer advised, "Go and bathe there. First take a bath there and go home. They will present you this *bat*. Distribute the *bat* to all therein. They should take from your part of the food. They, your co-workers in help (*kiryar*), have eaten their part of the food, and they have left your part to you. At the end, when you'll eat, the food will not finish. Then keep the small bowl aside and ask your brother to come and pull the beam. They will laugh at you. After touching/pulling the beam thrice, you ask your brother to hold the other side of the beam and pull."

Thus, he comes and takes a bath there where the spring has erupted. Afterwards he comes here in the house. His brother is surprised and says, "Oh! How quickly you returned?" He says, "I got the beam." He asks, "Where is that?" He replies, "Wait, it will come, a person will bring it." Then he comes and gives his part of the *bat* to him that has been left for him. Then he offers the *bat* in the small pot to everyone, and they laugh at him. Everyone takes from the food. The first person takes from the food, second takes, third takes, everyone turn-by-turn takes, but the food is not finished. Each one of them blames each other that you do not take fully from the food and they reply, "Oh dear! I have taken fully but the food fills in the bowl again." When all of them are finished with taking from the food, the food is not finished. They then say there must be some unknown secret.

Then he ascends onto the wall and asks his brother to come up. He asks, "What to do?" Khoja Big Ali tells his brother, "Let's pull the wood/beam." Khoja Maribor replies, "The people will laugh at you. Is it possible to pull wood?" Khoja Big Ali insists, "Okay, it doesn't matter if they laugh at us. But come on! Let's try." After touching the beam three times, Khoja Big Ali asks his brother to hold the other side of the beam. He holds the beam and Khoja Big Ali pulls. The beam thus stretches beyond the required limit. Then the people say, "Oh God! There must be something, some secrecy herein."

Khoja Maribor pulled it. Khoja Big Ali held it and he pulled it and it became long. Then when it stretched he had *didor* of Khizer at the spring, and Khizer said, "Don't stay there at the house you made, your place will be in Langar." The Langar of our Pamir. Then he said, "Your place will be there." He said, "True." Then he made the house and went to Langar.

After construction of the house, he goes to Langar. When he is in Langar, he goes to the top of a cliff (*buq*). There he constructs a mosque and offers prayer. Now his grave is also there. This brother has seen it. His house is there, downward. He

then offers prayer there and his brother is also there. Behind his brother are two dogs, like a wolf, of course, wolves. They are still alive and sometimes they appear and both are white. He thus takes his prayer-mat (*jāy-e namāz*) on the Panj River, puts it on the surface on the river and offers prayer. The Panj River has a huge amount of water that covers our riverbed during summer. His brother sees that he showed him his miracles. This Khoja Big Ali laid his *pustek* (prayer-rug of skin) on the surface of the river and offered prayer. He showed his miracle. There was ice there. He took that ice and broke it, and put it in the cave and he left the teakettle on it and the ice burned. It brought the tea to a boil. They showed each other their miracles, Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor.

The miracles in Sost are made possible through the *didor* of Khizer. Khoja Big Ali and his brother are engaged in beneficial work when they realize that the beam for the house is too short. Faced with this difficulty, Khoja Big Ali departs to obtain more wood. Outside, he meets Khizer, the saint who can remove difficulties.<sup>23</sup> Khizer, who is associated with water, causes a hot spring to emerge from the ground. This hot spring exists today in the Sost settlement area of Sarhadd-e Brughel. It is very helpful to the people there, providing warm water for bathing and washing clothes in the high-altitude settlement. Khizer advises Khoja Big Ali to wash in the water, and after doing so, Khoja Big Ali is imbued with *barakat* so that he performs several miracles: the food cannot be finished and is replenished, and he stretches the beam. A bowl that provides unending food is a well-known motif of South Asian and world oral tales (Aarne, 205-06; Thompson and Roberts, 85-86). The motif of stretching the roof beam, however, is a miracle attributed to several northwest Indian religious leaders: ‘Abd al-Ghafur, the Ākhund of Swat, and Ram Singh,<sup>24</sup> a Sikh leader from Firozpur (Temple, 325-26).<sup>25</sup> Temple comments that “the same stories are told of all of . . . the religious leaders in the Punjab” and that “tales radiate from a few central stories which are probably very old.” Temple’s comments on multiple existence and variation, hallmarks of oral tales, indicate that Khoja Big Ali’s stretching of the beam is acknowledged as a proof of miraculous powers and *barakat* that is recognized throughout not only the Pamir, but also the northwest region of South Asia. The story from Sarhadd-e

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<sup>23</sup> See the discussion of the *qadamgoh* shrine of Khoja-e Khizer below for details about Khizer.

<sup>24</sup> Ram Singh is regarded by some as the 12th guru in the Sikh guru lineage, although the orthodox Sikh tradition closes the guru *silsila* (*selsela*) after the 10th guru, Gobind Singh (d. 1708), after which the Guru Granth Sahib becomes the final and eternal guru of Sikhs.

<sup>25</sup> Temple’s brief article is based on a 24-page pamphlet by Rev. T.P. Hughes, “The Akhund of Swat, a Muhammadan Saint, and Dilawar Khan, the Converted Afghan Brigand,” published in Calcutta by the Christian Intelligencer in 1876.

Brughel of Wakhan dips deep into the signifying well of oral narratives to tap a regional source for spiritual authority.

After performing miracles in Sost, Khoja Big Ali again encounters Hazrat Khizer who instructs him to move to Langar. There, he and his brother display miracles demonstrating control over the solid and liquid forms of water by burning ice and praying on top of the river. Khizer's *barakat* and his association with water enable the two brothers to perform their miracles involving ice and water. From a landscape perspective, Langar marks the extent of Wakhi settlement in Wakhan. In effect, it is the upper limit of Wakhi and hence Isma'ili influence, a boundary whose existence is demonstrated by the custom of bringing the bodies of any Wakhi who die on the Pamir to Langar for burial in the ground made sacred by Khoja Big Ali. It is fitting that Khizer, who aids those traveling in the wilderness, instructed the two Khoja saints to go and occupy this remote and aptly named settlement.<sup>26</sup> Located at the uppermost edge of the Wakhi and Isma'ili area of Wakhan, Langar needed powerful saints to protect this border. Even today, the authority of Khoja Big Ali and the sanctity of his *mazar* are acknowledged and respected by all who travel through Langar. Moreover, his authority is maintained by the two white wolves mentioned in the narrative. A separate narrative underscores the power and authority of the saint. When outside people came to dig the *mazar* of Khoja Big Ali for artifacts, the two wolves appeared and attacked the would-be robbers, who were also pelted by stones piled at the grave. The power of the saint at his site is such that the site cannot be desecrated. In their daily lives, Wakhi people moving between the Pamir and the lower settlements stop here to offer prayer and seek the saint's blessing (Figure 5).

### Qadamgoh (Qadamgāh) Shrines

At the west end of the village of Sast is the *qadamgoh* of Khoja-e Khizer (Khwāja-ye Khezer). Khizer, "the Green One," is a prophet made immortal by drinking the water of life. Although identified with the guide of Moses mentioned in the Koran, Khizer is closely associated with mystical Islam as a guide and aid for travelers, especially those in out-of-the-way places (Hodgson, 460-61; Omar, 286; Renard 2011; Wensinck 2011). Because Khizer appears to help those in need, his shrine in Wakhan is both *oston*—that is, a place where one can receive his blessing—and *qadamgoh*, where he appeared to

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<sup>26</sup> *Langar* means a kitchen or rest-house where food is prepared for the poor or for travelers or pilgrims.



Fig. 5. Khoja Big Ali *mazar* at Langar

guide or aid those in need. In Sast, the shrine is amid a grove of trees and is bounded by a low wall. The grove borders on barren land and is an appropriate location for a saint associated with vegetation and life.

An elder of the village described his own experience with the shrine:

Here is a *qadamgoh* of Hazrat Khoja-e Khizer. This is a very sensitive shrine. It is here on the lower side of the road, among the trees. Hazrat Khoja-e Khizer is alive. He is always alive in this world. He is always in movement. Khizer is alive in all places. The miracles are indicated, if you go with pure heart and ask of him, whatever it is, it is fulfilled. For example, if you go with clean mind and pure heart and wash your face and go on Friday night, whatever you request, it will come to you. For instance, when my brother passed away, I had no children. I went there and bowed my head and said, "I need nothing else in this world other than children because alone I cannot maintain my livelihood." So at present, he has bestowed upon me four sons. One is currently teacher in the school. And sir, my daughter is also in the school. I made a vow and went weeping to the court of Khoja-e Khizer and Almighty God and here I washed my face in the water at the shrine of Khoja-e Khizer Hayat (i.e. *hayāt* "life") and he fulfilled my intentions.

The color associated with Khizer is green and an epithet of his in Wakhan is *Savz pushon* (Pers. *sabz-push*), the green-clad one. Khizer has also been described as "a venerable man clad in white raiment" (Omar, 289; Nicholson, 13). This depiction resonates strongly with the image of the venerable man clad in white, well known throughout the Pamir-Hindukush region (Mock 1998, 76-77) (Figure 6).

The Isma'ili communities in the Pamir and Hindukush regions, as has been noted, trace their origin to the eleventh-century Isma'ili missionary, poet, and philosopher Nāser Khosrow (Iholiev 2008b, 63; Schadl, 71). He lived the last fifteen or twenty years of his life in the small village of Yomgān, deep in the Hindukush mountain region of what is today Badakhshān Province of Afghanistan (Hunsberger, 227). In Yomgān, Nāser found refuge and patronage under an Isma'ili ruler, and a place to write. Most of his written works that we have today were completed in Yomgān. And it is in Yomgān, south of the town of Jorm on the road to the famous lapis lazuli mines at Sar-e sang and the Anjoman pass to the Panjshir Valley, that the tomb and shrine of Nāser Khosrow is located today (Dupree, 10-21; Schadl, 64).

Nāser's writings give no indication of how he may have carried out missionary activities in the region. Yet the wide dispersion of Isma'ili traditions and the universal reverence for Nāser as a saint and as the chief proponent (*pir-e qodus*) of Pamir Isma'ilism incontrovertibly demonstrates that his mission and teachings indeed spread from Yomgān throughout the region.



Fig. 6. Khoja-e Khizer *qadamgoh* at Sast

Local tradition does describe Nāser's activities and places him in locations in the region. In the village of Yimit in Wakhan, there is today a shrine at the place where Nāser demonstrated several miracles and brought his message to the people. Yimit is located approximately four kilometers downstream from Khandut, the present district headquarters (Mock and O'Neil, Appendix 5). Nāser was the most important Muslim saint traveler, and his shrine is a highly significant exemplar of the shrine tradition of Wakhan and, by extension, of the Pamir-Hindukush region.

The Yimit *mukhi*<sup>27</sup> voiced his concern about the vulnerability of the Nāser Khosrow shrine complex during an interview, recognizing its importance and the need to preserve it. Speaking on behalf of the Yimit Isma'ili community, he expressed a desire to keep the shrine complex within the compound of the *jamat khana*, and asked for the author's help in notifying the Department of Jamati Institutions<sup>28</sup> that a compound should be built to preserve the site.

Like shrines in Tajikistan Wakhan, the Yimit shrine complex is visited both by individuals seeking the saint's *barakat* for personal reasons and by the community for annual observances. An annual observance takes place at the time of the Persian New Year (observed 16-18 March in Wakhan). The community marks the first day of the month of Aries (Hamal) as a day of celebration of Hazrat Pir Nosir Khusraw (i.e. Nāser Khosrow). In Wakhan, the exact day, called *shohgun*, is determined through observation of the sun in relation to a fixed point on the mountains above the village, as seen from a fixed point within the village. According to the Yimit *mukhi*, "When the sun comes between those two rock peaks on the mountain, on that day we start the new year. That is our *shohgun*." This observational system of calculating the agricultural calendar is used in other Wakhi villages in Tajikistan and Pakistan (Iliiev 2008a, 92).

In Yimit, villagers state that one person makes the observation and that the individual, called *hamal-bin* ("Aries-observer"), "should be pious, honest, elderly, and well-liked by the community." When the *hamal-bin* sees the sun touch the point on the mountain, he goes and informs each household to prepare themselves and put on clean clothes. Community members wash, put on clean clothes, cook special food, and one or two hours before dawn, assemble at the shrine of Nāser Khosrow for the ritual of Shohguni Nosiri Khusraw. The ritual is described thus:

<sup>27</sup> *Mukhi* is the guardian of the *jamat khana*.

<sup>28</sup> The Department of Jamati Institutions at the Secretariat of His Highness the Aga Khan at Aiglemont in France is responsible for coordinating the activities and programs of the Isma'ili community's institutions.

We each carry a small wooden pot (*pori*) of flour and a large container (*kubun*) of bread (*kbech*) and go there. People of all the clans go there, but the women are not allowed and outsiders are not allowed. The tradition is like this, if outsiders are allowed, for one week there would be a blizzard (*zem dama*). It would be cold. The community members gather, eat the food, offer prayers, and then they start throwing flour on each other. They catch each other and together throw flour at one another. We throw so much flour that the meadow becomes covered with flour.

Afterwards, the elders kiss each other's hands, then the gathering disperses and the people return to their houses and clean the smoke (*duda*) for the new year. They sweep their house and clean the smoke from winter fires. Then small pieces of wood are put under the roof in the house as an obstacle (*shigard*) which we call *shohgun band*, it is a custom in each house. Afterwards, we take out the seeds. Our *shohgun* and our work starts from this date. This is our tradition of our Nāser Khosrow. Yimit is famous for this. From there onward, the New Year becomes easy for the people.

Throughout Wakhan, people depend on Yimit for this ritual. From Putr to Sarhadd the people commence it. Until the sun reaches the specified place, we do not commence the ritual. We wait for our sunlight to reach that point. This tradition of Nāser Khosrow that is in our village, among all the Wakhi people, this is ours alone. This tradition arrived here in Yimit, and we have faith in it. We always calculate by this sun of Nāser Khosrow and we start our work accordingly. This custom comes from our elders, from our many generations.

The story of how this ritual is connected with Nāser Khosrow is also interesting. In brief, it goes like this: Nāser arrives in Yimit dressed as a wandering mystic (*malang, dervish*) in old clothes and carrying a wooden staff (*osoy*). There in Yimit, a wedding feast is taking place. Nāser enters the wedding house (*tuy xona*), but is rebuffed and abused, and the men in the wedding house throw stones and sand at him. One woman of the house, however, shows him respect and greets him kindly, and Nāser speaks kindly to her. He then leaves the wedding house and goes to a location at the edge of the village. There, he plants his staff in the ground and a grove of trees miraculously grows from the staff. Nāser then changes into regal clothes and mounts his white horse (*duldul*). He carries a sword (Wakhi *xingar* = Pers. *khanjar*) instead of a staff. He returns to the wedding house and is greeted with honor. The men offer him food but he refuses it, saying that when he came in rags, they would not offer him food, but now that he has come in robes, they offer him the tastiest delicacies. He then commands his sleeve (*drest*) and whip (*qamchin*) to eat the food. The food turns to stone on the spot. One "green stone" Nāser touches with his whip and it splits into two. On one side are "five deep finger (*yangl*) marks," which represent "the qualities of *panj-tani*." On the other side are seven holes (*kulkul*) that symbolize the *haft hodud-e din* (lit. "seven stages of religion," the seven steps in Isma'ili hierarchy). Nāser then rebukes the



people and, in some versions, he then brings down a flood on the people as punishment (Figure 7).

As Nāser is leaving the wedding house, the men ask him for guidance and for his blessing. He tells them that his blessing will remain with them if every year, from now until forever, they throw sand and stones at each other on the *shohgun rawor*, just as they threw sand and stones at him. The people agree, but later, however, substitute flour for the sand and stones. Today, everyone agrees that although Nāser's directive (*amr*) was for sand, people now throw flour at each other.<sup>29</sup>

At the site today, the food that Nāser turned into stone remains as a token of the miracle and is the focal point of veneration. The stone objects are displayed under a large willow tree inside a low-walled compound. (Figure 8)

This story of a visitor scorned because of his worn clothing and rough appearance occurs in the *Safarnāma* of Nāser Khosrow as the well-known episode of Nāser and his brother at the baths of Basra (Hunsberger, 205-08). Clad in old and coarse clothes, Nāser and his brother are denied entrance to the baths by the attendant. Children throw stones at them and chase them away. Nāser is able, however, to obtain decent clothing and he returns to the baths, where he is made welcome. The attendant is ashamed of his previous conduct and is apologetic.

The Yimit story seems an adaptation of this event from Nāser's travels and, as a conversion narrative,<sup>30</sup> is emblematic of the acceptance of Nāser's message and teachings by the people of Yimit and Wakhan. The Basra bath episode from the *Safarnāma*, interestingly, is written in Persian at the threshold to Nāser's tomb in Yomgān (Schadl, 85), indicating that it was highly significant to Pamiri Isma'ili tradition. It seems reasonable to assume that the story circulated through the region and reached Yimit, though it is impossible to ascertain whether Nāser actually visited Yimit. Yimit is approximately a one-week journey on foot from Yomgān and it is, therefore, conceivable that Nāser might have visited the kingdom of Wakhan.

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<sup>29</sup> For a current account of the Nauroz festival as observed in the Wakhi area of Hunza, which includes the *shogun*, the solar observations and the throwing of the flour, see "The Return of SEMN and Thagam Festival," in *Pamir Times* online at: <http://pamirtimes.net/2008/03/07/the-return-of-semn-and-thagam-festival/>. Tibetan *Losar* (New Year) observances also include throwing *tsampa* (barley flour).

<sup>30</sup> The essential equivalence of conversion narratives and founding legends or "legends of origin" in Central Asia, and the ethnogenic function of such discourse has been thoroughly described by DeWeese, especially pages 489-90.



Fig. 7. Naser Khosrow miracle stone at Yimit



Fig. 8. Liver, kidney and heart of sheep turned to stone by Naser Khosrow at Yimit

Tradition does state that Nāser did not go beyond the Yimit-Khandut settlement, as this interview with a member of the Khandut Ismaʿili community indicates:

If he has gone up to Sarhadd and taken the Ismaʿili *daʿvat*, if he appeared in some empty place and if any error (*ghalati*) was made or not, it hasn't been written in any book and no historical record remains. Perhaps no mistake was made. In the Wakhan area, the only mistake (*ghalati*) occurred in Yimit, and then he said, "Yimit! Let the flood go and destroy the cruel settlement (*zolm-ābād*)."

With this mention of a flood as retribution for the sins of the villagers, the Wakhan oral narrative moves beyond the outlines of the story from Nāser's *Safarnāma* and begins to take on the structure of another famous regional narrative; the story of Kampir Diyor (Pers. *Diār*) "the old woman's village" in the Chapursan Valley, a Wakhi population area in Pakistan adjacent to Wakhan (Mock 1998, 319-22). The general shape of this widespread Karakoram legend is that an old man appears and is refused hospitality by all but an old woman. The white-bearded saint blesses the old woman and instructs her to

leave her home for high ground. She does so and looks back to see the saint upon his white horse, bringing a devastating flood down upon the village that scorned him. Her winnowing basket is turned to stone and remains on the roof of her now-destroyed house as a token of the saint's power. Stories following this pattern are known from the Raskam Valley east of the Shimshal Pamir, the Shigar Valley of Baltistan, and the Darel Valley of Indus Kohistan (Mock 1998, 306). The existence of this story type in non-Isma'ili settlement areas demonstrates that the story, even if its roots may be in Nāser's experience at the baths of Basra, is retold with a different significance. For example, all the valleys are prone to catastrophic glacial outburst floods, which could suggest a correlation between geophysical context and interpretive constructs of landscape.

### Conclusion

Previous religious traditions preserved in places such as the *oston* at the Khandut *jamat khana* and in objects such as the Panja stone are now integrated into Islamic tradition. The power and significance of these objects and places, the narratives told about them, and the rituals connected with them are part of a shared understanding that shapes the identity of the people residing in the landscape. As long as people have resided there, it is likely that the sacred quality of the landscape and of particular outstanding objects in it have formed part of the sacred history of the region.

The legend of Nāser Khosrow's miracles in Yimit is the most fully developed and detailed of the shrine narratives, and incorporates sacred objects, rituals, and places. It serves as a powerful paradigm of identity for Isma'ilis in Wakhan and in the Pamir-Hindukush region. The narrative itself has links to other narratives, including—through the image of the white-bearded saint—the widespread legends of Hazrat Khizer. The Khizer narrative also underlies the narrative of Khoja Big Ali and Khoja Maribor. The narratives together form a whole that is consistent and cohesive for the community. The legends of saints and shrines incorporate places, objects and motifs sacred in pre-existing traditions so that the saints and shrines have become part of the intrinsic system of beliefs and practices, a process also noted in the west Pamir, the Hunza Valley, and Central Asia (Dodykhudoeva, 151; Frembgen, 100; McChesney, 68).

Legends of saints are literally "God's truth," providing the interpretive lens through which communities represent their past and understand how they came to be who they are in the present. Such legends are the means by which

the past is made intelligible and are unfailingly described by people as historical accounts. Legend and history are not separable categories from the perspective of those who tell these legends.<sup>31</sup> It is our outside analytical perspective that problematizes their coherence and unity and views them as two separate categories. Through telling and hearing these legends, the community constitutes and validates an interpretation of the world as a place where miraculous events occur.

Such legends draw upon a commonly understood set of signifiers and follow a familiar discursive pattern: a set of topoi that recur throughout the region, analogous to shared bundles of linguistic isoglosses that define it as an ethno-linguistic region. On a more specific level, the legends are connected with sacred places known to all members of the community. In retelling these legends, community members recreate the landscape within which they live and revitalize the deeds of their saints and their ancestors in the landscape.

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<sup>31</sup> The word *legend* (from Latin *legere* "to read") derives from Medieval Latin *legenda*, which were exemplary accounts of saint's lives, to be read on that particular saint's appointed day. In folklore studies, *legend* refers to nonhistorical or nonverifiable narratives passed from generation to generation and popularly accepted as true. The problem of such "apparent irrationality in folklore" is one of appearances, i.e., of which interpretive lens we choose to apply.

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# Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines



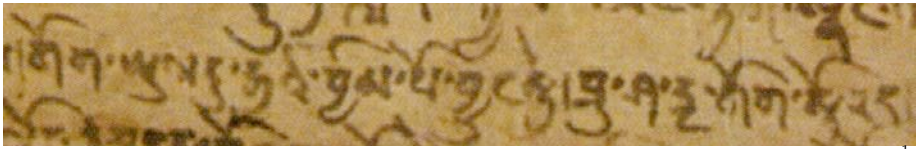
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## A Tibetan Toponym from Afghanistan

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(Independent Scholar)

The Old Tibetan Annals (OTA) provide us with a record of 8<sup>th</sup> century toponyms that have persisted to the present day. Written in Old Tibetan and sent from central Tibet to Dunhuang, the OTA recorded Gog and Brusha as the names for what we now know as “Wakhan” and “Brushal” (the land of the Burushaski-speaking Burusho people of Hunza and Yasin):



*gog. yul. du. rgya'i. byim. po. byungtse/ bru. sha. dang. gog. stord/*  
“The Chinese *byim-po* (army) arrived at Gog-yul (Wakhan).  
Bru-sha and Gog were lost.”<sup>2</sup>

This brief entry for the year 747-748 CE records the Tang Empire’s campaign against Imperial Tibetan force in Wakhan, in which General Kao-Hsein Chih’s 10,000 Tang troops defeated a Tibetan army near present-day Sarhad-e Broghil in Wakhan District of Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, an event more fully recorded in the Tang Annals, as would be expected (Chavannes 2006a:186-89; Stein 1922:117-22; Beckwith 1987:130-33).

The Tang Annals transcribe the name of Wakhan as *Hu-k’an*, and Christopher Beckwith (1987:133 fn) notes that the Tang pronunciation of *Hu*<sup>3</sup> would have been /ɣwak/ or /ɣwag/, both of which would have been transcribed in Old Tibetan as *gog*. *Gog*, or *Gog-yul*, he notes, is the Old Tibetan transcription of the native name for

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<sup>1</sup> Old Tibetan Annals II, OR.8212.187, line 10. Dotson, 2009:315 Plate II.i OTA images © British Library Board. Available online at: <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>

<sup>2</sup> Dotson 2009:128-9. Also available online at: <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>

<sup>3</sup> Schuessler’s recent study confirms that Old Chinese *hü* (GSC 2-8; GSR 784) was pronounced as *gwâkh* (Schuessler 2008:67).

Wakhan. The Old Chinese toponym *gwâkh*, preserved in Old Tibetan *gog*, is remarkably close to Wakhan, which is derived from *wuxh*, the toponym used by Wakhi people today. (The phoneme *xh* is a palatal fricative, difficult to pronounce for non-native speakers of Eastern Iranian languages, who often transcribe it as /k/ or /kh/).<sup>4</sup>

On several trips to Wakhan, I located a previously unknown site where rock carvings and inscriptions give ample evidence of Tibetan occupation over time (the site is discussed at length in Mock 2013). At this site, in the center of a large boulder with a glacially-polished surface, are Tibetan characters, bruised into the surface, that spell *gog*. Immediately following *gog* is an amorphous bruised area, which is quite illegible and may be an artifact. In any case, the characters appear in isolation. This inscription appears to be an on-site confirmation of the toponym *Gog* in Old Tibetan.



In the OTA, the toponym *Gog* occurs in the years 745, 747, 756. *Bru-sha*/*Bru-zha* (with which *Gog* is closely associated) occurs in the years 737, 740 and 747. Both are mentioned more frequently in the Tang Annals, where the toponym *Balur*<sup>6</sup> is used rather than *Brusha* (Beckwith 1987:30, 116; Chavannes 2006b). The importance of *Balur* is

<sup>4</sup> For more on the cultural, historical and linguistic background of Wakhan, see Mock 2011:118-20.

<sup>5</sup> Original photograph © John Mock, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The geographical and political extents of both Lesser and Greater Bolor, despite considerable efforts, are not well-defined. See Denwood 2008 and Zeisler 2009.

underscored by the words of the Chinese Imperial Commissioner, when in 722, Tibetan forces invaded Balur. King Mo-chin-mang of Little Balur fled to Tang territory and appealed for aid, to which the Imperial Commissioner replied; “Balur is Tang’s western gate. If Balur is lost, all of the Western Regions will be Tibetan!” (Chavannes 2006a:182 fn, my translation).

The Palola Shahi kings of Balur were wealthy patrons of Buddhism, commissioning sumptuous bronze Buddha images and copying and preserving important Buddhist texts – the famous Gilgit manuscripts. Their “astonishing rich and flourishing Buddhist culture” (von Hinüber 2003:35) also left a legacy of Brahmi inscriptions and Buddhist art on numerous rocks throughout the Gilgit region.<sup>7</sup> The cultural, political and strategic significance of Balur for the Tang court is undeniable. Therefore, it is not surprising that when, in 740, the ruler of Little Balur married a Tibetan princess<sup>8</sup> and the Tang Imperial Commissioner’s fears of losing the western regions to Tibet were realized, the Tang Empire sent an army of 10,000 to re-take the “western gate.”

Chinese dominance, however, was brief, and Tibetan control of Wakhan appears to have resumed in 756 CE and lasted until the mid or late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE (Beckwith 1987:144-5, Denwood 2009:156). The decline of Tibetan power in Wakhan not unexpectedly corresponds with the end of the Imperial Tibetan period and of Tibetan control of Dunhuang in 848 (Dalton 2007:18).

Two interesting points are highlighted by this brief study. First, the emergence of Tibetan influence in Balur corresponds with the decline of Chinese influence and the end of several centuries of Palola Shahi rule (von Hinüber 2004:7), a shift that is reflected in the decline of the toponym Balur in favor of the toponym Brusha.<sup>9</sup> Second, the ethnonyms and toponyms used by the inhabitants of Wakhan and Brusha, as recorded in the Old Tibetan Annals, are accurate historical antecedents of terms in use by the indigenous population today. Brusha, the toponym recorded in the OTA, persists today in the ethnonym Burusho, the language name Burushaski, and the toponym Brushal. The toponym Gog/γwak, which is recorded in both the Tang Annals and the OTA, persists in the ethnonym Wakhik, the

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to the discussion of the Palola Shahi rock inscriptions in von Hinüber 2004, see also the wider discussion of rock art and inscriptions in Jettmar 1989.

<sup>8</sup> The Lady *Khri ma lod* married the *Bruzha rje*, or Lord of Bruzha, the title the Tibetans conferred on him. Such marriages resulted in *zhang dbon* relationships, in which the Tibetan king was *zhang* or uncle, and the local king who married the princess was *dbon* or nephew (Richardson 1998:16, Dotson 2009:31-37).

<sup>9</sup> Jettmar comes to a similar conclusion, linking it to growing influence of Kanjudi/Burusho ministers in the Palola Shahi realm (Jettmar 1993:83-88).

language name Wakhik-wor, and the toponym Wuxh/Wakhan. The Old Tibetan inscription from Wakhan offers *in situ* confirmation of the OTA toponym, and undoubtedly dates from the Old Tibetan imperial period.

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## Darkot Revisited: New Information on a Tibetan Inscription and *mchod-rten*

John Mock

**D**espite being well-known, the Tibetan inscription and associated *mchod-rten* outline incised on a boulder south of the Darkot pass in present-day Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan) has remained unexamined since Aurel Stein's visit on August 29, 1913. Subsequent scholars have relied on Stein's black and white photograph (Stein 1928: Fig.46, reproduced in Denwood 2007:51), A.H. Franke's translation of the inscription (Francke 1928:1050-51), and Stein's description and analysis linking the *mchod-rten* and inscription to the period of Tibetan imperial power in the Wakhan-Balur region from roughly the late 7<sup>th</sup> century CE to the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century CE (Stein 1928:44-47, Jettmar 1993:95, Denwood 2007:45-46).

I visited the Darkot Pass in 1994 and photographed the 45-degree angle rock in color (Mock and O'Neil 1996: facing p.225). The rock appears much as Stein described. The dark surface patina is an inscribed palimpsest with long-horned ibex figures as perhaps the oldest depictions, the Persio-Arabic phrases and names as the newest, and the Tibetan inscription and associated *mchod-rten* dating from some time in between. The singular rider above and to the right of the *mchod-rten* Stein judged to be from about the same time as the *mchod-rten*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stein based his chronology on "weathering" and "difference of colouring" (1928:46), which is today termed repatination, or the gradual return of the weather-induced patina to the rock surface. It offers a relative chronology for rock palimpsests such as this, but gives no indication of the time interval between the layers of composition. Fortunately in this case, historical and orthographical evidence allows for more accuracy in the dating of the inscriptions and the *mchod-rten*.



Darkot Pass boulder, John Mock 1996

In Stein's black and white photograph, taken from a position to the photographer's left of the rock, the inscription, especially the final line, is, as Denwood (2007:45) noted, "certainly difficult to make out". Nor does Stein's image clearly show the ibex figures, the Persio-Arabic writing, or the rider on horseback.

However, by using both photographs, it is possible to offer a new reading of the inscription. This can be compared with a newly-discovered Tibetan inscription from nearby Wakhan (Afghanistan). The locations of the Darkot and Wakhan sites, their historical provenance, and the relationship of the rock carvings with the landscape can be combined to offer new information on the Tibetan imperial period in the Wakhan-Balur region.



Enlarged view of inscription, John Mock 1996

Francke read the first three lines of the Tibetan inscription as:

*rMe-'or*  
*lir ni*  
*dor*

with *rMe-'or* as the clan name and *lirni dor* as the personal name of the “erector” of the *mchod-rten*. The name *lir ni dor* is difficult to read in both photographs, due to the angle, weathering, and a large crack along the left edge of the inscription. In particular, the character “la” is unclear, and an alternate reading of “wa” cannot be ruled out. The vowel “i” (*gi gu*) above the “la” appears to be a reversed *gi gu*, an archaic orthographic variant that was very common in Dunhuang manuscripts but gradually fell out of use by the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Den-

wood 1980:161; van Schaik n.d.). Howsoever we may read the second line, it does appear to be a name, following a typical inscription formula in which clan name (*rus*) precedes personal name (*mying*) (Francke 1928:1050; Richardson 1998:18; Tsuguhito Takeuchi personal communication). This inscription is similar to inscriptions from Ladakh,<sup>2</sup> which follow the clan name – personal name formula.

Francke read the fourth line as *gyi*, which the color photograph confirms. However, Francke read the final line as *om*, noting that “the *om* is extraordinary”. He ascribed this extraordinary quality to the two characters in the final line, which he interpreted as “*o* above the *m*”, noting that “the *Anusvara* [was] not being used.”

In Stein’s black and white photograph, the final line is not clear and so could be misread as the vowel “*o*”, which when written with the *a-chen*, is similar in shape to the consonant “*ya*” with *na-ro*. The final character “*na*” is even more difficult to read in Stein’s photograph, due to the odd angle from which the photograph was taken and the low contrast of the black and white image. Syntactically, however, Francke’s reading is improbable (“the *om* of *lir ni dor*”), which may have prompted Denwood (2007:45) to suggest that the inscription is “probably fragmentary”.

The more recent color photograph clearly shows that the final line of the inscription is better read as *yon*. The phrase *gyi yon* is a typical offering phrase in which the possessive/genitive case marker *gyi* and the noun *yon* (“gift”) follow a name (Karmay 1998:327, 330). Francke notes that similar inscriptions recording the donations of *mchod-rten* are found throughout Ladakh and that most show the name of the donor in instrumental case, but “only the most ancient inscriptions show the name in the genitive case”, which, he notes, follows “the example of Indian inscriptions of a similar type ... written in Brahmi, Kharosthi, and Sarada” (Francke 1928:1050-51). The last syllable *yon*, not *om*, is the appropriate grammatical and semantic ending for a *mchod-rten* offering inscription, which in this example may be rendered in English as “the gift of *rMe-'or Lirnidor*” (with alternative readings of the personal name possible).

The onomastics of the names deserve comment. Although the clan name *rMe-'or* does not appear in any known lists of Tibetan clan names,<sup>3</sup> Francke (op.cit.) remarks that it is “distinctly Tibetan”. Nor is the name *lir ni dor* attested in any Old Tibetan documents. Denwood (2007:45) comments that “*li* suggests a person from Khotan” and

<sup>2</sup> Published examples from the ruined fort (*mkhar 'gog*) on the left bank of the Indus near Saspol on the road to Alchi are found in Denwood 1980 and Francke and Jina 2003. Orofino 1990 has examples from beyond Alchi.

<sup>3</sup> A similar clan name, *rMe-u*, is well-known as one of the founding clans of Bonpo (Karmay 1998:120; Karmay 2007:73).

suggests the inscription and *mchod-rten* may have been made by “a passing Tibetan trader” (2007:50). The previously mentioned uncertainty in the reading of this name leaves open the question of whether it is a Khotanese name.

The clan name *rMe-'or* can now be accepted with greater certainty, as it also appears in a similar *mchod-rten* donation inscription in Wakhan (Mock in press 2013). The Wakhan inscription reads: *rMe-'or btsan la gzigs gyl [yon]*, with the final syllable illegible, but one may assume it follows the similar pattern where *yon* (“gift”) would be expected. The genitive marker has a reversed *gi gu*. The *ga* preceding *zigs* appears at the end of the preceding line, faintly apparent inside the *mchod-rten* structure. *btsan la gzigs* appears to be a title (*mkhan*) rather than a name, possibly from Ladakh (Francke 1914:40, 51; Richardson 1998:17-20).



Wakhan *mchod-rten* and inscription, John Mock 2013

The design of the two *mchod-rten* also deserves comment. They share an unusual shape, which Francke (1928:1051) first termed “cross-like”. Denwood noted that this design is typical of the western Himalaya and Karakoram,<sup>4</sup> and that Jettmar considered the design to be an innovation made during the time of imperial Tibetan rule in the region (Denwood 2007:45). Denwood published a similar design from near Alchi in Ladakh (Denwood 2007:52, fig.5), Tucci photographed similar designs near Alchi and at Khalatse (Orofino 1990:figs. 17, 18, 30, 39, 40), and Jettmar and Sagaster discuss an example from Punyal near Darkot (1993:129, Abb.8).

The shared *mchod-rten* design, inscription formula, and identical clan name, together with the Tang Annals documentation of the Darkot pass as a route from/to Wakhan, link the Darkot *mchod-rten* to the Wakhan *mchod-rten* and site.

I have proposed elsewhere (Mock in press 2013) that the Wakhan site is located on the “Northern Gorge” route taken by three thousand horsemen of the Chinese army to attack a Tibetan force at the *Lien-yün* fort in 747 CE (Chavannes 2006a:183; Stein 1922:118). The Wakhan site was probably the location of a hill-station (*ri-zug*), used for signaling with fire or smoke to raise the alarm if enemies approached. Stein (1912:152-53) described these at Miran near Dunhuang and Takeuchi, who studied them in detail, suggested they may have also existed along the southern route of the Silk Road including “Little and Great Balur ... and the Pamirs” (2004:55). Dotson links Tibetan hill-stations with “red fire raising stations” that are mentioned in the Old Tibetan Annals (2009:56-57).

The above-mentioned stylistic and epigraphic parallels of the Wakhan *mchod-rten* and inscription with the Darkot *mchod-rten* and inscription, suggest that the two sites may have shared a similar function. The Wakhan site appears to have been a *ri-zug*, and the Darkot site also may have been near a *ri-zug*.

The inscribed Darkot boulder sits along the trail about 45 minutes below the edge of the Darkot glacier at an altitude of approximately 4000m. The boulder is about 5 minutes below a small level area where even today Wakhi men occasionally camp when traversing the Darkot glacier for purchasing supplies at the road head bazaar in the Yasin valley. This site is on a ridge which is visible from the valley below and is marked by a large stone cairn. From the boulder to Rawat, the first village in the Yasin valley, it is a steep 1 ½ hour descent of 1000m (Mock & O’Neil 1996:177-78). The location is not one that a “passing Tibetan trader”, like today’s Wakhi traders, might

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<sup>4</sup> Laurianne Bruneau (personal communication) notes that this design is actually quite rare in the rock art of both Gilgit and Ladakh.

have stopped at for more than one night. The approximately one meter tall *mchod-rten* and inscription, carefully bruised into the rock surface to a depth of approximately 5 cm., could not have been completed in one day; more probably, many days were needed, which raises the likelihood that a person or persons stationed at this high elevation remote post near the base of a glacier inscribed the gift of a *mchod-rten*. Takeuchi has noted that *ri-zug* were typically manned by two Tibetans and two Khotanese (Takeuchi 2004:54), which buttresses Denwood's hypothesis that the individual named in the inscription may have been Khotanese. If the site were used for signaling, then several men would have been present, suggesting that the Darkot *mchod-rten* may have been the gift of a Khotanese man, but the actual rock carving and inscription may have been done by another person literate in Tibetan, possibly a Tibetan man.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

The historical associations of the site with both Tang Chinese and Tibetan imperial annals (Chavannes 2006a, 2006b; Dotson 2009) and the parallels with similar *mchod-rten* offering compositions in Wakhan (Mock in press 2013), clearly place this inscription in the Tibetan imperial era. As Denwood (2007:46) observed, the inscription may have been created during an initial Tibetan impulse into Wakhan and Balur in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, but more likely, it was created after the major Tang – Tibetan conflict at the contiguous Broghil pass region in 747 CE, when Tibetan troops were made keenly aware of the need to guard the routes to and from Balur/Bru-zha.

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<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps the inscriber was not Tibetan but was literate in Tibetan. Scribes from Khotan worked at Dunhuang (Dalton et.al 2007). Rock inscriptions at Alchi, dating from the same time as proposed for the Darkot and Wakhan inscription, were likely made by Central Asians (Denwood 1980:162-163).

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