While the Old Road across the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan connected Taxila to Bactria and western Central Asia, an alternative network of intertwined passageways through deep river valleys and high mountain passes in the upper Indus region of northern Pakistan directly linked major arteries of the Northern Route of the Indian subcontinent with branches of the silk routes in the Tarim Basin of eastern Central Asia. Capillary routes following the Indus, Gilgit, and Hunza rivers and side valleys across passes through the western Himalaya, Karakorum, and Pamir provided paths for long-distance trade and cross-cultural transmission between transregional overland arteries at a “Crossroads of Asia.”

Before the construction of airports, jeep roads and the Karakorum Highway (KKH) between Pakistan and China, capillary networks gave ancient travelers many choices of north-south and east-west itineraries. Modern routes followed by the KKH through northern Pakistan and the Salang tunnel north of Kabul across the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan have eclipsed the ancient pathways through mountain valleys and passes, but travelers who wrote their names in graffiti inscriptions and drew images on rocks at river crossings and wayside shrines were not restricted to staying on major highways.

As Marc Bloch remarked in regard to medieval Europe: “Traffic, in short, was not canalized in a few great arteries; it spread

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1 “Crossroads of Asia” broadly encompasses the modern Northern Areas of Pakistan, although the phrase also applies to the Tarim Basin of Xinjiang in western China, borderland areas of northern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, and western Central Asian republics of Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Errington and Cribb extend the concept of “Crossroads of Asia” to parts of India and Iran: “For us the Crossroads of Asia is a broad concept, centrally focused on Afghanistan, but also including the southern Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tadzhikistan, to the north; eastern Iran, or Khorasan to the west, and the northwestern parts of Pakistan and India to the east and south” (1992: 1). Owen Lattimore includes Mongolia, Xinjiang, and other areas of eastern Central Asia in the “Inland Crossroads of Asia” (Lattimore, Owen. 1962. Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958. London: Oxford University Press, 119–133).

capriciously through a multitude of little blood vessels” (1961 [1949]: 1.64). Bloch’s comments on medieval European roads are relevant to trans-Asian routes:

It is in the nature of good roads to create a vacuum around them—to their own profit. In the feudal age, when all roads were bad, scarcely any of them was capable of monopolizing the traffic in this way. (Bloch 1961 [1949]: 1.63)

Instead of following a single main route, “... the traveler had almost always the choice of several itineraries, of which none was absolutely obligatory” (Bloch 1961 [1949]: 1.64). Rather than functioning like interstate highways in the United States or the Autobahn in Germany, which create vacuums by monopolizing traffic, multiple itineraries allowed merchants, monks, pilgrims, and other ancient travelers to choose from interconnected passageways. Their decisions depended on many factors, including the seasonal condition of mountain passes and river fords, the availability of provisions, animals, and porters, as well as political stability, security, and sometimes the location of religious shrines along the way. Topographical imperatives were often decisive in choosing routes through the high mountain desert environment, where travel from one point to another in a straight line was not possible. Since crossing the high mountains was difficult for large groups of traders in caravans, capillary networks were probably used for a smaller scale of trade than the bulk trade of the main arteries.

Indian, Iranian, Chinese, and Tibetan inscriptions and petroglyphs lining the interconnected pathways belong to travelers and residents from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and show that this region was definitely not a “cul de sac” (Fussman 1986c: 56–58; 1993b: 1).

The written and visual records, as well as stray archaeological finds, the testimony of Chinese pilgrims and other literary references, and evidence of Buddhist manuscripts and sculptures found near Gilgit demonstrate significant patterns of cross-cultural movement. Capillary routes through this high-altitude transit zone between South and Central Asia were used for migrations across the mountains, long-distance trade in valued commodities and cultural expansion. Multidirectional flows of travelers bringing trade goods

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Map 5.1: Capillary networks in Northern Pakistan
and materials as well as religious texts and images to and from many points via interconnected capillary routes in the upper Indus region supports a model of long-distance transmission rather than unidirectional diffusion along a major artery.

Capillary networks in northern Pakistan (Map 5.1) belonged to larger networks of trans-Asian trade routes, and played a crucial role in linking the major overland arteries of South Asia with the silk routes of Central Asia and China. While earlier chapters gave broad overviews of South Asian networks, this chapter focuses on the role of a particular transit zone in Buddhist transmission beyond the Indian subcontinent. In the first part of the chapter (Geography, Economy, and Capillary Routes in a High-Altitude Environment), geographical and economic features are given a detailed treatment in order to explain links between transregional and intraregional networks. The second part of the chapter (Graffiti, Petroglyphs, and Pilgrims) examines epigraphic records and visual markers in correlation with literary accounts of Chinese pilgrims, Arabic and Persian sources, and a Khotanese Śaka itinerary. These combined sources illustrate Manifestations of Buddhist Presence at individual nodes in the upper Indus, Gilgit and Hunza valleys. The implications of this evidence for understanding patterns of long-distance Buddhist transmission at élite and sub-élite levels are discussed in the chapter conclusions.

**Geography, Economy, and Capillary Routes in a High-Altitude Environment**

Deep river valleys and high passes in the mountain desert environment played determining roles in the formation of capillary networks that linked this border region to ancient Gandhāra, Swat, Kashmir, and the Tarim Basin. The Karakorum, Hindu Kush, and western Himalayan mountain ranges converge in this area, where many of the world’s tallest mountains are concentrated, including K2 (8611 m), Nanga Parbat (8126 m), Rakaposhi (7788 m), and Batura (7785 m). The stark difference in altitude between the summit of Nanga Parbat (8126 m) and the bottom of the Indus gorge (ca. 1300 m) indicates “a very young uplift” (Gansser 1964: 66) in terms of geological time.5 Glaciers cover over a quarter of the Karakoram mountain range, which is

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a larger percentage than any other region outside of the polar ice caps. Due to the very arid climate of the valley floors (Gilgit, for example, only receives an average of 134 mm of rainfall per year), sustainable agriculture in the high mountain desert environment relies on glaciers to supply water for irrigation. While the gradual advance of glaciers down the slopes of the mountains often block roads, retreating glaciers can open new routes. The geological dynamism and vertical landscape presented special challenges for habitation and long-distance trade and travel, but the geographical barriers were not insurmountable.

Many valuable commodities, especially precious stones and metals, either originated in or were transported through the mountains of northern Pakistan. Several gemstones incorporated into the *saptaratna* classification are found in the upper Indus region and adjacent areas of Chitral, Swat and Kohistan. Emeralds, yellow-green epidote, green actinolite (which includes the jade mineral nephrite), green serpentine, pink to fine red rubies, and variously colored spinels are associated with the Indus suture zone running through Hunza and Gilgit to Swat. In fact, ruby deposits in the rocks at Haldeikish almost led to the destruction of the graffiti and petroglyphs. Gemstones associated with pegmatite deposits in areas between Gilgit and Skardu and in the Hindu Kush near Chitral include a blue variety of beryl, many types of multicolored tourmalines, topaz, feldspar (moonstone), and quartz. Many types of crystal, a favorite material for reliquaries and carved geese (*hamsa*), are also found in northern Pakistan. The main sources for lapis lazuli were located in the valley of the Kokcha River in Badakhshan (northeastern Afghanistan), which was linked to the upper Indus region via Chitral.

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11 Kazmi 1995: 289; a crystal goose (*hamsa*) is “the symbol of the wandering soul and the promulgation of the Buddhist doctrine to all realms” (Errington 1998: 86).
River Valleys and Mountain Passes in Northern Pakistan

The Upper Indus, Gilgit, and Hunza rivers and their affluents form natural passageways through alluvial canyons in the narrow valleys between the high mountain ranges. However, as water levels increase due to melting snow during the summer (mid-May to mid-October), the swollen torrents of these rivers become treacherous to cross. Since the rivers are much easier to ford after water levels recede, the period from October to January was probably the time of maximum mobility in the upper Indus region. If conditions were unsuitable for crossing turbulent rivers or snowbound passes, travelers had to delay crossing the rivers and mountain passes until conditions became relatively safe. Many concentrations of inscriptions and rock drawings mark important junctions where travelers may have been temporarily forced to stop while waiting for the right conditions to proceed onwards. In connection with the location of Buddhist petroglyphs and inscriptions at a crossing of the Indus River near Chilas, Aurel Stein observed:

The possibility of risks run at these crossings, when the Indus in the early spring and summer carries down its mighty floods, might also have served to stimulate such acts of devotion or gratitude. (1944: 22)

Karl Jettmar, who followed in Stein’s footsteps but was able to explore sites in the region more thoroughly, also suggested that dangerous river crossings motivated travelers to make images and write graffiti:

In olden times as well as up to the twentieth century this was a maneuver of considerable risk. You prayed before you started and you offered thankful gifts when you had succeeded. (1979: 920)

Jettmar proposed that “the valleys on both sides of the Indus must have been a series of seasonal ‘waiting rooms’ for travelers” (1989: xxvii).


Travelers from Gandhāra, Swat, and Kashmir could take several routes to the upper Indus transit zone, depending on the time of year and local conditions. Very difficult routes through the deep gorges of the Indus River now followed by the KKH in the Kohistan district of NWFP are described by Chinese pilgrims as the “Hanging Passages.”15 This was the most direct way from the upper Indus to the Swat valley, but long-distance traders probably followed less dangerous routes which were open during restricted periods.16 A route from Mansehra which passes through the Kagan Valley and over the Babusar Pass to Chilas is only open during the summer because accumulations of snow prevent passage during other seasons. Therefore, travelers coming from the upper Indus had to wait until May or June to use this route, while travelers coming from Mansehra, Kashmir, or points further to the South (such as Taxila) needed to begin their journeys by August.17

During his expeditions to eastern Central Asia in the early twentieth century, Aurel Stein explored routes through the upper Indus region used by earlier Chinese pilgrims.18 On his first expedition from Kashmir to Central Asia in 1900, Stein followed the ‘Gilgit Transport Road’ through the Astor valley, which was built in 1890–92 to supply British military campaigns in Gilgit, Chitral and Hunza. Although he commented that this route “...is marked out by nature as the most accessible line of communication from Kashmir to the Dard territories northward” (1907: 1.1), he later realized that other routes between Kashmir and Chilas were more practical than the difficult route of the

15 Jettmar locates the “Hanging Passages” between Sazin and Jalkot, where “the dangerous part of the journey came to an end” (1987a: 99).
17 Jettmar 1987a: 98.
Gilgit Road, which lacked grazing areas for laden animals.\textsuperscript{19} Several capillary routes between Kashmir and Baltistan cross the high-altitude Deosai plateau, and it is possible to reach Ladakh by following the Indus River.\textsuperscript{20}

Traditional connections between Kashmir, Gilgit, Baltistan, and Ladakh continued to be used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but are now blocked by border disputes between India and Pakistan. Traditional caravan routes from Khotan and Yarkand in the southern Tarim Basin crossed the Karakorum (5575 m) and Muztagh (5370 m) passes in the eastern Karakorum range to Ladakh and Baltistan. While these routes across the Karakorum Pass continued to be used until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, at least four other passes over 5000 meters had to be crossed, and the journey over several barren stretches took about a month to complete in one direction.\textsuperscript{21} Since the eastern Karakorum routes were extremely difficult, routes further to the west through the Pamir range were more likely choices.

Pamir routes were “the safest and quickest way across the stupendous mountain barriers between Central Asia and India” (Klimburg 1982: 33). According to Klimburg, “Probably the most important among the ancient trails from the Pamirs down into Gandhāra followed the Chitral Valley” (1982: 28). Song Yun and Huisheng probably followed these routes on their journey between Chitrāl (She-mi), Swat (Wu-chang), and Gandhāra around 519–20 CE.\textsuperscript{22} A route through the Yarkhun valley in the eastern Hindu Kush of present-day northeastern Afghanistan and the Chitral Valley in northwestern Pakistan provided connections to the capillary network of the upper Indus region. The main route to Chitrāl follows the Kunar River (lower Yarkhun River) from Jalalābād (ancient Nagarahāra) through Nuristan in eastern Afghanistan. Several routes converge in Chitrāl, including a route

\textsuperscript{19} Stein 1928: 1.4–5; Lorimer, Emily O. 1939. Language Hunting in the Karakoram. London: Allen & Unwin describes the immense difficulty of crossing these passes on the Gilgit Transport Road in a snowstorm at the end of the summer.


from Swat and Dir over Lowari Pass (ca. 3118 m) and a route to the north over Dorah Pass (ca. 4554 m) continues to Badakhshan. Other passes provide connections to the Wakhan or Ab-i-Panja valley, one of the sources of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) which flows through western Central Asia.\textsuperscript{23} The Baroghil Pass (ca. 3804 m) links the Wakhan valley to the upper valley of the Yarkhun River, and the Darkot Pass (ca. 4630 m) connects the upper Yarkhun valley with the upper Yasin valley.\textsuperscript{24} The headwaters of the Yarkhun valley are joined via the Karambar Pass (ca. 4188 m) with the Karambar valley, which feeds into the Ishkoman River near Imit.\textsuperscript{25} The Karambar valley is connected with the Wakhan valley via the Khorab Bhurt Pass (4630 m) and with the Chupursan valley via the Chilinji Pass (5247 m).\textsuperscript{26} The interlinked network of high mountain passes was intermittently used by various travelers, merchants, pilgrims, and semi-permanent resident communities for crossing the permeable frontiers between Central Asia and South Asia.

Capillary routes through the Yasin and Ishkoman valleys linked Gilgit to the Wakhan valley in northeastern Afghanistan. Although petroglyphs have been discovered in the Ishkoman valley near Imit, the paucity of Buddhist rock drawings and visitors’ inscriptions suggests that routes through these valleys were not as popular as routes through Hunza-Haldeikish, Gilgit-Alam Bridge, and the upper Indus during the first millennium CE.\textsuperscript{27} Nevertheless, epigraphic and archaeological evidence from sites such as Hatun (five km north of the confluence of the Ishkoman and Gilgit rivers), Gakuch (across the Gilgit River from the mouth of the Ishkoman Valley), and Bubur (on the northern bank of the Gilgit River in Punyal) show that this part of the Gilgit valley was included in the domain of the Palola Şâhis during the seventh

\textsuperscript{23} Klimburg 1982: 26, Map 2.
\textsuperscript{24} Kreutzmann1996: 265, fig. 42; Stein 1928: 1.45–7, figs. 43, 48.
\textsuperscript{25} Stein 1928: 48–50, figs. 47, 49–50.
\textsuperscript{26} Stein 1928: 1.50 ff., figs. 51–2, 57, 61. According to Stein, “It is only for a few weeks in the early spring and autumn that it is possible to follow the route leading up the Karambar valley to the north and across the Khorab-bhurt pass (about 15,000 feet) to the Afghan Pamirs. Even then it is far from easy” (1928: 1.48–9).
century and was probably significant in the Tibetan-Chinese conflict in the middle of the eighth century.  

Numerous capillary routes link the upper Indus valley with Gilgit, which still serves as the administrative and commercial hub for the Northern Areas. During the summer, interconnected routes through side valleys of the Gilgit and Indus rivers allowed ancient travelers to bypass dangerous river crossings. Paths through the Kar Gah and Shingai Gah valleys, located west of Gilgit near Naupur, lead over the main ridge of mountains to watersheds of the Kiner Gah and Hodar Gah valleys and to petroglyph and graffiti complexes at Thalpan and Hodar on the northern bank of the upper Indus River. The Kar Gah headwaters are connected with the wide valley of the Khanbari Gah, which flows into the upper Indus downstream from Thor and Oshibat. Affluents of the Gilgit/Ghizer River provide possible connections with the Tangir and Darel valleys, which join the Upper Indus near Shatial. A seasonal route through Mastuj connects Chitral to Gilgit over the Shandur (ca. 3734 m) and Chamarkhan (4334 m) passes. Stein noticed rock drawings of stūpas with Brāhmī inscriptions at Pakhtoridini and near the village of Charrun between Mastuj and Chitral along this route. Another feeder route from the South over the Kachikani Pass (ca. 4766 m) directly connects the upper Swat Valley to the Gilgit River. Thus, a network of river valleys and mountain passes through the Pamir and Hindu Kush connect Chitral with Gilgit, Badakhshan, Swat, and ancient Gandhāra.

In addition to these capillary routes through mountain valleys, a major route follows the Gilgit River downstream to its confluence with the Indus River near Alam Bridge, where Kharoshṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti along with some petroglyphs mark an important crossing. This complex is located at a junction of regional routes connecting Gilgit

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29 Connections between these valleys are clearly visible in the NASA Landsat image in the map of “Rock Carvings and Inscriptions along the Karakorum Highway” in Jettmar, ed.:1989 [ANP 1]. The colossal image of a Buddha carved from a rock cliff overlooking the Kar Gah valley indicates the importance of routes through these valleys.
30 Tsuchiya 1999: 379, map 3.
32 Stein 1921: 1.37–41, figs. 5–6.
33 Klimburg 1982: 26, map 2.
with Baltistan through deep gorges of the Indus River (still used as the main road to Skardu) and with Kashmir across the Deosai plateau or through the Astor valley. Visitors to this complex who were traveling on routes between Hunza, Gilgit, Baltistan, and the upper Indus probably arrived during the late autumn, winter, or early spring, when rivers could be crossed safely and temperatures on the valley floor are bearable. This micro-network of intra-regional capillary routes between neighboring valleys was used for intra- and interregional travel and trade.

Hunza-Haldeikish is the northernmost major site of graffiti and petroglyphs. West of Hunza is the Ishkoman valley of the Ghizar district, and southeast of Hunza is the Shigar valley of Baltistan. Nager is located directly across from Hunza on the southern and eastern side of the Hunza river. To the south, the KKH connects Hunza with Gilgit and extends to the north through Sost via the Khunjerab pass (ca. 4600 meters) to Tashkurgan. From the Wakhan valley, the Irshad Unwin Pass (ca. 4926 m) is connected to the headwaters of the Chupursan valley, which joins the upper Hunza River. The Mintaka (ca. 4629 m) and Kilik (ca. 4755 m) passes also provide access from the Misgar valley of northern Hunza to the Taghdumbash Pamir area of southwestern Xinjiang. In addition to routes over the Mintaka, Kilik, and Khunjerab passes and through the Chupursan valley which closely follow affluents of the upper Hunza River, paths over the Shimshal pass and a difficult trek over the Hispar glacier to Baltistan may have also served as minor feeder routes to the Hunza valley during various periods. Although the reputation of Hunzakuts (residents of Hunza) as infamous raiders of caravans discouraged travelers from passing through the valley in pre-colonial periods, Haldeikish graffiti show that these routes were widely used in the early- to mid-first millennium CE. Because of its strategic location on trans-Asian routes crossing the Karakorum mountains, Hunza is not an isolated and remote utopia impervious to change, but an important crossroads affected by outside influences throughout its history. Capillary routes through the Hunza Valley must have always been difficult due to constantly shifting glaciers, avalanches and landslides, steep paths through

34 Stein 1928: 1.51–2.
35 Stein observed that the Kilik and Mintaka passes “can be crossed, even with laden animals, during the greater part of the year” (1907: 1.21).
narrow canyons, and swollen rivers and streams during periods of snowmelt. Although the Hunza route was an important capillary through the Northern Areas, it was not the only possibility nor was it always the most practical choice. Capillary routes across the Karakorum and Pamir ranges provided relatively quick and direct connections between the long-distance trade routes of the northwestern Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Despite the difficulties of these routes over the Pamirs to northern Pakistan, “A shortcut between Central and South Asia was possible, partly compensating for the dangers and strains” (Jettmar 1989: xxvii).

Graffiti, Petroglyphs, and Pilgrims

About 5000 graffiti and over 30,000 petroglyphs written and abraded onto rocks along capillary routes in the upper Indus region demonstrate remarkable mobility across the high mountain terrain. Visitors and local residents created designs and wrote brief inscriptions by abrading (rather than incising) the dark surfaces of rocks with pointed stones or metal implements. The dark patina, called “desert varnish,” is formed by a combination of the autochthonous process of iron and manganese leaching from the interior to the surface of the rocks over thousands of years to develop a smooth coat and the allochthonous action of windblown sand and dust in the arid mountain desert environment which creates a shiny exterior polish. As in Native American petroglyphs, the repatination of the lighter lines of drawings and inscriptions preserves a contrast with the older desert varnish. This process of repatination can sometimes indicate the relative chronology of petroglyphs and inscriptions, but rates of repatination of desert varnish vary widely from place to place and even from rock to rock depending on geology and orientation to the sun. Jettmar, relying on his own experience with prehistoric carvings, estimated that full repatination of petroglyphs takes three or four millennia, but this figure depends on exposure to the sun as well as the quality of the rocks.37


Ghulam Muhammad published the first account of petroglyphs and inscriptions carved on stones on the banks of the Indus River. In 1942 Aurel Stein examined groups of inscriptions and petroglyphs near Chilas which had not been noticed by British officials who, with the exception of John Biddulph and D.H.L. Lorimer, had little interest in the antiquities of the Gilgit district. Subsequent explorations of the upper Indus valley confirmed that these earlier discoveries were “the tip of an iceberg.” After the completion of the Karakorum Highway (KKH) connecting Pakistan and China in 1979, Karl Jettmar and Ahmad Hasan Dani initiated efforts to document rock drawings and inscriptions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. Studies of selected inscriptions and petroglyphs, including analysis of their historical, religious, and artistic significance, have been published in volumes of *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan*. Nine volumes of *Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans* (MANP) published to date thoroughly document petroglyphs and graffiti at Oshibat, Shatial, Hodar, Shing Nala and Gichi Nala, Dadam Das, and Chilas Bridge / Thalpan. These publications supply crucial data for examining the nature of long-distance trade and religious transmission in northern Pakistan.

Brāhmī, Kharoṣṭhī, Sogdian, Bactrian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Hebrew inscriptions provide concrete evidence for cross-cultural contact, religious dynamics, and linguistic change. Travelers and local residents

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recorded their own names, often along with the names of their fathers, in formulaic graffiti. Onomastic patterns in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī inscriptions reveal a mixture of Indian, Iranian and indigenous proper names reflecting the cultural diversity of travelers and residents who wrote graffiti and drew petroglyphs. Formulae of arrival with various expressions for “x arrived (here)” explicitly refer to travel, with records of visitors from as far away as Mathura.⁴⁴ Unlike donative inscriptions at Bharhut, Sāñcī, and caityas in western India with numerous references to merchants and traders, graffiti from northern Pakistan rarely include titles specifying the visitors’ occupations. Consequently, very few travelers are explicitly designated as merchants, apart from vaṇī (vaṇī) (Oshibat 82:2) and sārthavāha (sarthavahasya) (Shatial 39:23).⁴⁵

About 600 Sogdian, Bactrian and Iranian inscriptions provide strong evidence for the use of long-distance routes through the upper Indus between the third to seventh centuries.⁴⁶ Although occupational titles rarely appear in Sogdian graffiti in northern Pakistan, toponyms and personal names derived from places near Samarkand and ethnonyms connected with China and Kucha suggest that many of these travelers were merchants involved in long-distance trade between Sogdia, northern Pakistan, the Tarim Basin, and China.⁴⁷ Sogdian inscriptions have also been found in Ladakh, including a record dated in year 210 (perhaps corresponding to 841/2 CE) of “Caitra of Samarkand, together with the [Buddhist] monk Nōsh-farn, sent as messengers to the Qaghan of Tibet” (Sims-Williams 1993: 158–9, no. 2, pls. 2–6).⁴⁸ Sogdian travelers who reached Ladakh and Tibet probably followed routes along the upper Indus through northern Pakistan. Epigraphic evidence of Sogdian and other Iranian inscriptions found along the


⁴⁵ Hinüber 1989a: 46, no. 28, pl. 71.


upper Indus (especially at Shatial), Ladakh, and Hunza-Haldeikish validates Sims-Williams’ hypothesis that Sogdians “were engaged in the trade between India and Sogdiana and in that between India and China” along a triangular network of trade routes “with India, China, and Sogdiana as its three corners” (1996: 56).49

Chinese, Tibetan and Hebrew inscriptions in the Northern Areas also demonstrate long-distance diplomatic, cultural and trade relations. The Chinese inscription of “[Gu] Wei-long, envoy of Great Wei, now dispatched to Mi-mi” (Ma Yong 1989: 144, pl. 217) records the visit by an official envoy of the Northern Wei dynasty to Hunza-Haldeikish while traveling to the Sogdian center of Maymurgh around 451 CE.50 Tibetan inscriptions in Gakuch, Baltistan, Ladakh, and Hunza-Haldeikish show that Tibetan influence extended westwards to the upper Indus, Hunza, Gilgit, and Yasin valleys.51 A set of Hebrew inscriptions at the “Campsite” complex on the upper Indus River between Chilas and Oshibat records the names of Jewish merchants who may have replaced Sogdians as long-distance trading partners with Hindu merchants in Kashmir in the ninth century.52

Petroglyphs from prehistoric periods to the present time represent a wide spectrum of styles, motifs and images ranging from very common simplified drawings of mountain goats (*caprini*) to skillful renderings of Buddhist *stūpas*, portraits, and narratives. Each site has its own distinctive characteristics—concentrations of zoomorphic petroglyphs may indicate hunting grounds or trails into the mountains where game was available, while drawings and inscriptions at complexes located near settlements were more likely to have been produced by local inhabitants than visitors. Indian, Iranian, and indigenous elements adopted in petroglyphs indicate patterns of religious and cultural transmission. Buddhist and non-Buddhist petroglyphs

49 La Vaissière 2002 [2005] is a detailed study of the Sogdian trading network. For historical relations between Sogdian traders and Hephthalites in the northwestern frontiers of South Asia, refer to chapter 2, subchapter: *Kidāras and Huns in the Northwestern Indian Subcontinent*, pp. 159–170, especially 169–170.


(which are in fact the majority) exhibit hybrid features that sometimes deviate from standard iconographic repertoires of South Asian art. For example, unusual drawings of Harītī and images of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa and Baladeva-Balarāma labeled with relatively early Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions at the site of Chilas II are quite distinctive, and shed light on the multiple religious proclivities of visitors, who were not exclusively Buddhist.53 (Fig. 5.1)

Although Buddhist images are less numerous than other types of drawings at most sites, they provided locative foci for Buddhist veneration at outdoor shrines, attracted travelers and local devotees who added their names in proximity to the drawings, and indicate routes of transmission. Such “relics of instruction” (uddeśika dhātu) in the form of drawings of stūpas, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and narrative scenes established a Buddhist presence in areas without the resources (at least initially) to support residential monastic communities. In lieu of building monasteries and constructing stūpas with “bodily relics” (śarīra) or “relics of use” (pāribhogika dhātu), itinerant monks, artists, and local donors drew Buddhist images on rocks and recorded their donations of “religious offerings” (devadhārma) with inscriptions. The drawings concentrated at dangerous river crossings or in way stations below mountain passes attracted traders, travelers, and local devotees who wrote their names in proximity to the images at wayside shrines (caityas). Gifts of rudimentary stūpa images and more elaborate petroglyphs generated merit and expanded opportunities for worshipping and remembering the Buddha. Petroglyphs of ornate stūpas, jātakas, scenes from the life of the Buddha, and images of various bodhisattvas correspond more closely to Buddhist architectural and iconographical patterns. The standardization of Buddhist images in some rock drawings was probably due to closer contact with other Buddhist artistic traditions than was previously the case in earlier stages of long-distance transmission.

Literary accounts of Chinese pilgrims corroborate epigraphic and petrographic evidence for trans-regional movement to and from South Asia on these particular capillary routes from the fourth to eighth centuries. Faxian vividly described many details of his route across

53 Fussman, Gérard. 1989c. “Les inscriptions Kharoṣṭhī de la plaine de Chilas.” In Jettmar, ed. 1989 (ANP 1), 3–5, no. 1,2 (rama[kriṣa]), pl. 4; 10–11, no. 3,3 (haritī prāṭhakasa), pls. 10, 12; 15–16, nos. 7,3 (valadebo), 7,6 (vasudevo), pl. 18 (= fig. 5.1).
the “Onion” (Cong-lin) mountains between Khotan and Swat around 403 CE, but the precise path of this stretch of his itinerary remains uncertain. After leaving Khotan, he visited the mountain kingdom of Jiecha, “in the midst of the Onion range” (Legge 1886: 23), possibly located at Tashkurgan in southwestern Xinjiang, close to Skardu in Baltistan, or in Ladakh.54 After crossing the Onion mountains, Faxian visited Tuo-li, where a large wooden image of Maitreya was venerated by neighboring kings.55 Archaeological remains of such a shrine have not been found, but Tuo-li may have been located in a valley of an

54 Tashkurgan is generally accepted as the location of Jiecha (Kuwayama 1987: 711), but locations in Baltistan (Deeg, Max. 2000. “On the localisation of Faxian’s kingdom of Jiecha.” In Taddei and De Marco 2000: 877–888) and Ladakh (Legge 1886: 18, n. 2; 22, n. 3) correspond more closely to the report that Faxian and his fellow travelers “went westwards [from Jiecha] towards North India, and after being on the way for a month, they succeeded in getting across and through the range of the Onion mountains” (Legge 1886: 24). While travelers could proceed to the West from Tashkurgan to Wakhan, in other Chinese sources Tashkurgan is named Khe-ban-tuo/ Han-ban-tuo (corresponding to Khavandan in Sogdian), which makes an identification between Jie-cha and Tashkurgan unlikely.

upper Indus tributary between Shatial and Chilas. From Tuo-li, Faxian traversed the difficult “Hanging Passage” (xuan du):

From here they traveled southwest along the mountain range for fifteen days on a difficult path that was full of obstacles. The crags rose to a formidable height and there was nothing but precipitous rocks towering high in the mountains. One would feel dizzy when looking down from above, and there was no foothold for proceeding along the way. Below flowed a river called the Indus. The ancients had hewn a stairway-like path out of the rocks that has seven hundred steps. After climbing the stairway, the party crossed the river by walking carefully over a rope suspension bridge. The banks of the river were nearly eighty paces apart. (translated by Li 1996: 168)56

Zhimeng, another Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who left Chang-an (modern Xian) in 404 CE, followed roughly the same route as Faxian from Khotan though Ji-sha (Jie-cha in Faxian’s account) to Bo-lun.57 There, nine of the fourteen monks accompanying Zhimeng turned back to China and the Indian monk who was probably their guide died of fatigue.58 After crossing the “Snowy mountains” (Himalaya) and the Indus River, Zhimeng reached Jibin (probably Gandhāra rather than Kashmir). Other Chinese monks named Dharmavikrama and Hui-lan also journeyed from China to Jibin, probably through Bolor, the upper Indus, the Hanging Passages, Swat, and Gandhāra, to worship the relic of the Buddha’s bowl at Nagarahāra in the fifth century.59

The journey of Song Yun and Huisheng followed similar routes from the southern Tarim Basin to Swat and Gandhāra between 518–522 CE. Although he probably did not visit Bo-lu-le east of Chitral, Song Yun described the direct route from Swat in terms similar to Faxian’s description:

One has to cross iron-chain bridges across bottomless chasms; there is nothing to hold on to, and at any moment one may suddenly fall 10,000

57 Kuwayama cautions that Hui-jiao, who edited Zhi-meng’s biography, “…was quite careless of precise locations of North Indian kingdoms, or had little knowledge about Indian geography…” (1987: 711, n. 27). Nevertheless, the geographical position of Bo-lun between Jisha/Jiecha and Jibin is consistent with other accounts.
Capillary Routes of the Upper Indus

This is why travelers abandon their journeys at the sight of it. (Jenner 1981: 261)

According to Kuwayama (1987: 718, 721), later Chinese pilgrims followed routes further west towards Bactria and away from the infamous “Hanging Passage” in subsequent periods.

Xuanzang probably did not pass through the upper Indus region during his travels in Central Asia and India from 627—645 CE, but he described the route from Swat to the Indus River:

The roads are craggy and steep; the mountains and the valleys are dark and gloomy. Sometimes we have to cross by ropes, sometimes by iron chains stretched (across the gorges). There are foot-bridges (or covered ways) suspended in the air, and flying bridges across the chasms, with wooden steps let into the ground for climbing the steep embankments. (Beal 1884: 1.133)

Xuanzang also provided detailed information about the Maitreya image in Da-li-luo, where, according to his sources, gold and turmeric were found and where the former capital of Udāḍīyāna was located. A route led from Da-li-luo along the Indus River to Bo-lu-luo in the middle of the Snowy Mountains, which could be reached “by the help of flying bridges and footways made of wood across the chasms and precipices” (Beal 1884: 134–5). According to Xuanzang, Bo-lu-luo was long from east to west, narrow from north to south, rich in gold, silver, wheat, pulse (lentils), and other supplies, continually cold, and inhabited by rough people who spoke a somewhat different language written in similar letters to those used in India. The secondhand nature of this information is probably the reason why Xuanzang does not refer to the Palola Śāhi rulers of this region, whose support of Buddhist scholarship in the seventh century was contemporary with Xuanzang’s visit to Swat.

Huizhao, a Korean monk who visited India around 723–727 CE, traveled from Kashmir to Bolor, which at that time was divided into Greater Bolor (fifteen days’ journey northeast of Kashmir) controlled by Tibetans, and Lesser Bolor (seven days’ journey northwest of Kashmir) under Chinese dominion. Huizhao’s account includes some information about the customs, dress and hairstyles of the local inhabitants of Lesser Bolor. He also referred to poor economic conditions:

The poor are many and the rich are few. The valleys are narrow and cultivable lands are limited. The mountains are withered and sterile, with no trees or grass. (Yang 1985: 48)
Huizhao’s account of impoverishment contrasts sharply with the information in Xuanzang’s report from about one century earlier. While some elements may be exaggerated (e.g. “no trees or grass”), the region of Lesser Bolor may have indeed experienced economic and military catastrophes leading to the downfall of the Palola Sāhis during the eighth century.

Persian and Arabic texts supply details about the routes followed by merchants traveling between Central Asia and Northwest India. *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam* (“Regions of the World”), a Persian geography written in 982 CE, contains information about routes connecting western Central Asia with Kashmir through the present Northern Areas of Pakistan. Merchants and other travelers followed routes from the Oxus River through Badakhshan and the Wakhan corridor to Bolor in northern Pakistan. The description of Bolor (Persian *Bulūr*, corresponding to Chinese Bo-lu-luo), where “there is no salt but that imported from Kashmir” (Minorsky 1937: 121, §26.19), occurs between Samarqandāq (probably Sarhad in Wakhan) and Andrās (tentatively identified with Dras, about 100 km east of Srinagar on the route between Kashmir and Ladakh). As in later Chinese sources, Bolor proper is distinguished from “Bolorian Tibet” (Baltistan), where “[t]he people are chiefly merchants” (ibid., 93, §11.2). The itinerary in the *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam* outlines stages of an west-east network of routes which were probably used by earlier Sogdian merchants whose names are preserved in upper Indus graffiti of the third to seventh centuries.

Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048 CE) refers to a route between the northwestern frontier of Kashmir and the upper Indus valley which was very similar to those itineraries outlined in *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*. Following his discussion of the people, cities, and rivers of Kashmir, Al-Bīrūnī notes:

> Leaving the ravine by which you enter Kashmir and entering the plateau, then you have for a march of two more days on your left the mountains of Bolor and Shamīlān.... Their towns are Gilgit, Aswira, and Shiltās... (Sachau 1888: 1.207)

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61 Minorsky 1937: 369–70.

In this passage, Aswira can be identified with Astor, and Shiltās corresponds to modern Chilas.\(^{63}\) The “mountains of Bolor and Shamīlān” indicate the Karakorum, western Himālaya (including Nanga Parbat), and Deosai plateau in Baltistan. The route described by Al-Bīrūnī was the primary entryway to Kashmir through the valley of the Jhelum River, which could be reached from the Northern Areas through the Kagan valley and Babusar Pass above Chilas.

A Khotanese Śaka itinerary was probably the most popular north-south route between the Tarim Basin, Gilgit, Chilas, and Kashmir during the tenth century, but it may have been used widely for several centuries before and after this period.\(^{64}\) Although many places have not been identified, a significant segment of the route passed through the Ishkoman, Gilgit and upper Indus valleys.\(^{65}\) The text refers to an important ford of the Gilgit River at Bubur (Baubuera) in modern Punyal. The “king’s abode” was in the “great city” of Gilgit (Giḍagīṭti), where eight stone samghārāmas indicate that Buddhism was still flourishing.\(^{66}\) Chilas (Śilathasa/Śīdathasi) is referred to as another “great city” on the Indus River south of Gilgit. From Chilas, the Maṅgalacakra bridge could be reached after a journey of eight days, probably via the Babusar Pass and Kagan Valley. From “the first Indian city towards Kashmir” (Bailey 1936: 262) located at the bridge near the confluence of the Kishanganga and Jhelum rivers (close to Muzaffarabad), the itinerary describes places along the Jhelum River on the route to Baramula (Varṇavalā) in Kashmir.


\(^{65}\) According to Bailey (1936: 260, citing Morgenstierne), the “Blue River” may be identified with the Ishkoman River (Burushaski siqam means “blue”), the Sīna is the Gilgit River (ibid., 261), and the “Golden River” is the Indus (262). Tucci comments that Golden River “is here certainly not a mere poetical attribute” (1977: 19, fn. 17), since this region is associated with gold in other literary traditions.

\(^{66}\) Bailey 1936: 262.
In contrast to the rich corpus of petroglyphs and inscriptions and interesting literary references to the upper Indus region, very little archaeological evidence is available to corroborate the use of this network of capillary routes for long-distance trade and religious transmission. Aside from stray finds, the archaeological record for this region is very poor because systematic surveys and excavations have not been undertaken. Nevertheless, among the most notable discoveries are items which may have been imported during Saka migrations, including a bronze rhyton and another bronze vessel from the Ishkoman valley, a bronze plaque from the Kandia valley, and a large golden ring discovered near Pattan in the Kohistan district of the Indus valley. The paucity of other items imported through long-distance trade exchanges may also be due to the tendency of artifacts to be found at opposite ends of trade route terminals rather than in transit zones. The absence of archaeological remains of urban centers on routes through the mountain valleys of northern Pakistan does not necessarily indicate that traders bypassed this region in the first millennium CE, but instead probably relates to the inability of the physical environment to support large populations in cities. Judging from the meager archaeological remains of stūpas and monasteries in northern Pakistan, the establishment of large-scale Buddhist institutions in northern Pakistan did not take place before the middle to late first millennium CE.

The following overview begins downriver on the upper Indus at Shatial and ends at Haldeikish in the Hunza valley. Rather than a comprehensive survey, the focus of this tour is on inscriptions and rock drawings that demonstrate a Buddhist presence. Along the way, other important sites of possible Buddhist stūpa sites and shrines are noted. The largest concentrations of Buddhist petroglyphs in northern Pakistan are located south of Hunza-Haldeikish and Alam Bridge in the upper Indus valley between Chilas and Shatial.

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Shatial

Over one thousand inscriptions and seven hundred petroglyphs located at Shatial bridge on the upper Indus River mark an especially significant junction of ancient byways used by long-distance traders and Buddhist missionaries and pilgrims. Shatial functioned as an important “transit station” (Durchgangsstation) on routes connecting the upper Indus to the Swat valley and Gandhāra via the infamous “Hanging Passages” (xuan du). Across the Indus River from Shatial, pathways through the Darel and Tangir valleys lead northwards to Gilgit and Chitral, with further links to Badakhshan and the Oxus watershed in northeastern Afghanistan. Shatial is distinguished from other upper Indus sites by almost six hundred Iranian visitors’ inscriptions from the third to seventh centuries CE, which were primarily written by Sogdian visitors.

The longest inscription at Shatial was written by a Sogdian traveler on his way to Tashkurgan in southwestern Xinjiang:

(I), Nanai-vandak, the (son of) Narisaf, came (here) on the tenth (day/year) and have requested the favor from the soul of the holy place Kārt

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Bandini-König and Fussman 1997 (MANP 2).
Numerous Indian inscriptions written in the Brāhmī (411), Kharoṣṭhī (15), and Proto-Ṣāradā (7) scripts suggest that South Asian merchants met their Sogdian counterparts at this commercial hub or entrepôt. Drawings of 138 stūpas at Shatial also indicate the religious significance of this waystation, especially to Buddhist visitors. The most impressive Buddhist image at Shatial is a large triptych with an intricate drawing of a stūpa flanked by an illustration of the Śibi Jātaka (in which the king of the Śibis holds a bird which he has saved by cutting off a piece of his own flesh), and an unidentified structure that may represent another Buddhist narrative, with devotees prostrating below. The depiction of the king of the Śibis as a Buddha deviates from conventional representations. Based on paleographic analysis of Sogdian, Brāhmī, and Kharoṣṭhī graffiti densely written within and around these images, Gérard Fussman dates the drawing to ca. 350 CE. Thus, Shatial served multiple functions as a significant commercial node and as a wayside shrine where the jātaka story of King Śibi’s selfless gift of his own flesh may have been localized.

Oshibat and other “crossing stations” of upper Indus

Several important complexes located upstream from Shatial on the upper Indus are located where tributaries enter the Indus from side valleys or at river crossings where local, regional, and long-distance travelers drew designs and wrote their names while waiting to continue their voyages. A mixture of many types of petroglyphs at the “crossing station” of Oshibat depict animals (especially caprids, since simple drawings of goats or ibexes are by far the...
most common type of petroglyph in northern Pakistan) with a relatively small proportion of stūpa images (37 drawings are only 4% of the total).\textsuperscript{71} Numerous Brāhmī inscriptions (230) record Indian, Iranian, and local personal names (with -oṭ(t)a suffixes), and the names of visitors in some Sogdian inscriptions (26) recur at Shatial and other sites.

The crossing at Oshibat was linked to routes on the other bank of the Indus River, where petroglyphs and inscriptions at Helor Das, Hodar, and Dadam Das were made by local inhabitants as well as transregional traders and travelers. Over 130 drawings of stūpas demonstrate popular Buddhist devotion at Hodar. Brāhmī and Proto-Śāradā donative inscriptions indicate that many drawings were “religious offerings” of local inhabitants, including a scribe (divīra) named Bhita, who shared the merit from drawing abstract geometric stūpas with his mother and father.\textsuperscript{72} These transformed images of stūpas with only the most basic features of multiple foundations leading to an apex crowned by a staff,

\textsuperscript{72} Bandini-König 1999 (MANP 3): nos. 4:1–2, 4:5–8, 6:1–11.
sometimes in the form of a trident, show that simple drawings provided a focus for veneration and generated merit in essentially the same way as more elaborate petroglyphs. According to Volker Thewalt:

Many of these elaborate rock-carvings must be attributed to highly skilled craftsmen who received their artistic training in the great monasteries of Gandhāra, while others are crude imitations, executed by traveling laymen or the inhabitants of neighboring villages, wishing to gain some spiritual merit by reproducing these sacred monuments. (1985: 2.782)\(^73\)

The popularity of drawing and venerating *stūpa* images at Hodar contrasts with the relative paucity of Buddhist images at the nearby site of Dadam Das (only 5 *stūpa* petroglyphs), which seems to have functioned as a prehistoric hunting station and border post for long-distance traders such as ṝoṣala (37:10, 15, 24), who wrote his name in Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī next to an image of an Iranian fire altar (his name also appears at Shatial 54:24).\(^74\)

Among the petroglyph “stations” located at the mouths of the Harban, Khanbari, Minargah, and Gichi valleys, only the catalog of petroglyphs and inscriptions at Gichi has been published.\(^75\) This site can be divided between an eastern part with many Buddhist engravings near the remains of a settlement at the mouth of the Gichi stream and a western part with a majority of visitors’ inscriptions. *Stūpas* with anthropomorphic features included among 77 images of *stūpas* on rocks at Gichi Nala are associated with a local devotee named Saṅgamitra (nos. 31:1, 3, 4, 5), who seems to have introduced his own unique innovations into the designs (p. 113). Brāhmī inscriptions predominate, aside from a single inscription in Sogdian and an exceptional Hebrew inscription (no. 155:4). There are at least 25 examples of Buddhist dedicatory formulae (with *devadharm-, kṛta*, and *dhar-mahetuvārada*), and the repetition of the names of some visitors who wrote their names at other sites allows their routes through the upper Indus region to be reconstructed.

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Proceeding upriver from Shatial on the upper Indus, several graffiti and petroglyph complexes are located at crossing points, but many of the most impressive Buddhist petroglyphs are concentrated near the modern bridge between Chilas and Thalpan. The earliest petroglyphs of stūpas are found at the complex of Chilas II, where about sixty Kharoṣṭhī graffiti belonging to periods from about the first to third centuries accompany Buddhist and non-Buddhist petroglyphs. Rock drawings of stūpas at Chilas II typically have only three to five “umbrellas” or “parasols” (chattras) attached to a mast (yaṣṭi) above a rectangular harmikā which crowns a cylindrical dome (anḍa). A contrast between abundant stūpa drawings and the absence of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha at Chilas II leads Martha Carter to conclude that the Buddha icon was not included in “the common repertoire of devotional imagery” (Carter 1993: 363) at this stage in the upper Indus. Iconographic motifs connected with Buddhist, Hindu, and indigenous traditions shed light on the multiple

Fig. 5.4: Stūpa veneration at Chilas II (Source: ANP 1, plate 22)

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76 Bandini-König 2003– (MANP 6–9).
77 Fussman 1989c [ANP 1]: 1–40.
religious proclivities of visitors to this encampment, which was apparently not an exclusively Buddhist shrine. (Fig. 5.1)

At sites around Thalpan and Chilas a local patron named Kubera-vāhana donated several ornate stūpas as well as visual narratives of Śākyamuni Buddha’s religious biography. He is portrayed with his teacher Mitragupta in a detailed drawing of the Vyāghrī Jātaka, a widespread narrative in which a Bodhisattva (labeled Mahāsattva) makes a gift of his own body to save a hungry tigress and her cubs.78 Other petroglyphs of the Śibi Jātaka (also illustrated downstream at Shatial) and the Rśipañcaka Jātaka suggest that these narratives may have been linked with local or regional sites. Another prominent local patron named Sinhoṭa donated “religious offerings” (devadharma) of petroglyphs depicting the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya along with stūpa drawings at Chilas bridge. Other inscriptions denote homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas associated with the Mahāyāna such as Amitābha, Aksobhya, Prabhūtaratna, and Ratnaśikhin.79 The standardization of Buddhist images in rock drawings donated by Kubera-vāhana and Sinhoṭa at Chilas and Thalpan was probably due to close contact with Buddhist artistic traditions in neighboring regions of Swat, Gandhāra, and Kashmir.

Shing Nala

A shrine at Shing Nala, located approximately thirty km upstream from Thalpan, has a remarkable concentration of Buddhist petroglyphs, including 156 stūpas (41% of the total engravings) often recorded as “religious offerings” in Brāhmī donative inscriptions.80 Most of the Buddhist images and inscriptions are clustered around a large geological formation that periodically fills with water and serves as a place to rest in the shade of overhanging rocks. Since Shing Nala was not located on a major transit route, Ditte Bandini-König (2001: 57–58) hypothesizes that the localization of a Buddhist shrine was tied

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to the residential retreat of a Buddhist forest monk (*aranyavāsin*), who attracted visitors for a limited period around 500 CE. If this hypothesis is correct, Shing Nala was not a “wayside shrine” *per se*, but primarily functioned as a pilgrimage place, which became a focus for the devotion of visitors who made their own *stūpa* designs. Designs of elaborate *stūpas* with profuse architectural details and decorative elements and other complex Buddhist drawings are relatively scarce outside of Chilas, Thalpan, Shatial, and Shing Nala. Rudimentary images of *stūpas* with only the most basic features show that patronage was not restricted to élite donors.

**Alam Bridge**

Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti written on rocks near the confluence of the upper Indus and Gilgit rivers close to Alam Bridge reflect patterns of long-distance travel. While there are very few petroglyphs of *stūpas* or other images to indicate that this site functioned as a Buddhist shrine, personal names and titles clearly indicate that many visitors were Buddhist travelers or local devotees. Approximately twenty percent of the personal names in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti at Alam Bridge are composed of Buddhist naming elements. Examples of Buddhist titles in Brāhmī graffiti include a novice (*śrāmaṇera*) named Asokakṣema, a “Master of Monastic Law” (*vinayadhara*) named Ratnarakṣita, and a “Śākya monk” (*śākyabhiksū*) named Satyaśresthī. Brāhmī graffiti recording the visits of *Palolajo Bhikṣu* were written by Buddhist monks with regional ethnonyms, since Gilgit and the surrounding valleys were ruled by the Palola Śāhis until the early eighth century. Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti at Alam Bridge serve as valuable written records of the journeys of agents of Buddhist transmission.

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**Hunza-Haldeikish**

Inscriptions and petroglyphs at Hadikish in the Hunza valley mark a significant waystation on the network of capillary routes through the Karakorum mountains. Over one hundred Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī, Sogdian, Bactrian, Chinese, and Tibetan inscriptions at Haldeikish provide concrete evidence for the movement of travelers during the first millennium. Haldeikish is predominated by petroglyphs of mountain goats (the name of Haldeikish is derived from *haldén*, the Burushaski word for a male ibex or a domesticated male goat), which may indicate an ongoing connection with hunting expeditions. Four large rock outcroppings form a conspicuous natural landmark near an important ford across the Hunza River and provide a convenient resting place for visitors who drew zoomorphic designs and abraded graffiti into weathered patches of desert varnish covering the sandstone and shale surfaces. Since graffiti at Haldeikish primarily record the arrival of visitors in epigraphic formulae similar to those used at Alam Bridge and there are very few Buddhist petroglyphs, this site probably functioned as a transit station for long-distance travelers rather than a shrine for local devotees. Nevertheless, Buddhist personal names (appearing in a relatively higher proportion of the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, which outnumber other inscriptions at this site) indicate that Haldeikish belonged to the capillary network of long-distance routes of Buddhist transmission between South Asia and Central Asia.

**Conclusions**

This upper Indus border region of northern Pakistan was a significant transit zone for the initial phases of Buddhist transmission beyond South Asia. The climate and terrain of the high mountain desert environment severely limited agricultural production. Precious gems and metals found throughout the mountains of northern Pakistan probably provided a powerful incentive for undertaking difficult journeys through the mountains, since there is always a demand for such high-value/low-volume commodities. Hunting was evidently a major occupation based on scenes depicted in rock drawings and still has a meaningful role in local traditions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. However, in contrast to more fertile areas of Gandhāra, Swat, and the Kashmir valley, the material resources of this region were not suffi-
cient to support large residential Buddhist monasteries. Like the Takla Makan desert in Xinjiang (to be explored in the following chapter), the high mountain passes, deep river valleys, and other topographical features of this region were difficult to traverse in certain seasons. Nevertheless, images drawn on rocks located at nodes in networks of capillary routes and inscriptions written by visitors to record their arrival at crossing points clearly indicate that these physical barriers were not impediments to transregional mobility.

Buddhist names written in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī graffiti, various types of stūpa drawings, illustrations of jātakas and other Buddhist biographical narratives, and images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas reflect different stages in the regional establishment and transmission of Buddhism in the transit zone of northern Pakistan, which was definitely not devoid of a Buddhist presence. “Religious offerings” (devadharma/deyadharma) of Buddhist petroglyphs given to wayside shrines (caityas) localized the presence of the Buddha by acting as visual commemorative relics for local and itinerant devotees to worship in an environment that could not initially sustain permanent stūpas and residential monasteries. Chinese accounts of Faxian and Xuanzang refer to a Buddhist shrine with a colossal wooden image of the future Buddha Maitreya in the upper Indus region. However, its location is unknown, and archaeological evidence of local monasteries mentioned nearby the shrine has not yet been discovered. While Buddhist institutions are very well attested by archaeological remains of stūpas and monasteries in the Swat valley of ancient Udāiyāna, socio-economic conditions in the upper Indus apparently did not support a pattern of monastic settlement before a period of élite patronage by the Palola Śahi dynasty of Gilgit from the 7th to early 8th century. The enigmatic absence of a Buddhist institutional presence before this period did not mean that Buddhists were missing from the transit zone of the upper Indus. Instead, this overview of Buddhist petroglyphs and inscriptions has demonstrated that traders, itinerant monks, and local patrons began to localize religious topologies and narratives long before élite patronage led to increased levels of Buddhist literary and artistic production in Gilgit.