

IV Epilogue

1 The Ancient Cultural Heritage of the Northern Areas 'Doomed by the Dams'

One of the main challenges of future research is the systematic inventory of the rich archaeological and historical sites and monuments in the Northern Areas. Until 2008 the 'Pak-German Archaeological Mission to the Northern Areas' (PGAM) was able to register about 277 archaeological sites including 141 rock carving assemblages with 43,745 petroglyphs, among them 5246 inscriptions alone in this high mountain region. A stretch of around 93km as the crow flies (in airline distance) or 110km along the Indus River between Shatial in Indus Kohistan and the Raikot Bridge in the Diamer District has been intensively surveyed. Its documentation was accomplished in 2010. Yet a better understanding of the historical and cultural background of these monuments also needs to become a subject of current scientific projects. Along the ancient routes in the valleys, many ruins of settlements, smaller forts, resting places for the travellers, and sanctuaries still have to be identified. Important places such as the hilltop site of Hodar, the Buddhist monastery of Naupura near Gilgit, the Buddhist hill site at Shigar in Baltistan, with the ruins of a monastery and a large number of stupas, are waiting for more intensive research. The dramatic dimension of systematic plundering and devastation which occurs in many still unexplored cultural and historical sites in the Northern Areas has become obvious from archaeological objects occurring in collections outside Pakistan, originating from illegally looted ancient settlements and cemeteries. Even most of the megalithic stone circles at Seleharan at the confluence of Ghizer and Yasin rivers, in Yasin Valley, at Barandas or Daen in Ishkoman, northwest of Gilgit, are threatened or even destroyed by this ongoing development. And in spite of all considerations to establish cultural institutions for the education of the local population since the 1980ies, there still exists no public museum, neither in Gilgit nor in Skardu or in Chilas, where the archaeological and ethnographical heritage could be preserved and presented both to the local population and to visitors from other parts of Pakistan and the world.

When Bridget Allchin in 1987 rated the petroglyphs in the high mountain region as one of the three major groups in South Asia, with the paintings and drawings in the hill region of Central India and in southern Deccan, with regard to the near future she pointed to their threat by all kinds of modern development. The conservation and protection of the rock art in each of the three regions "is a matter of urgency". "This means that by careful planning the rock art can be spared: other rocks can be quarried, alternative routes chosen for roads, alternative sites for construction. More importantly, it means that there is time to plan development of these areas in such a way that the whole environment can be utilized without destroying its character".¹

1 Allchin 1987, 152–154.

Since 2006 the significance of a systematic documentation of the archaeological heritage obtained a new dimension when the government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan finally decided to plan cascading the river from Bunji to Thakot [Besham] by constructing a series of (hydroelectric) hydropower projects along the Upper Indus gorges at Pattan, Dasu (4320 MW), Munda (740 MW), Basha (4500 MW), Bunji (7100 MW) and Kohala. The Dasu Hydropower Project (3700 MW) is planned at a site 7 km upstream of Dasu Bridge and 69 (74) km downstream of the Diamer-Basha Dam. The river in this part of Kohistan runs through a narrow deep-cut gorge, whose steep slopes left no place for any settlements in the past and nowadays. Hence, the ancient route as described by Stein on his last courageous exploration tour at the end of August 1942 [...].² In this part of the river valley, there are no archaeological remnants, rock carvings or inscriptions known. The only important site which is endangered by the Dasu Reservoir is Shatial, the famous emporium of Central Asian merchants with its singular accumulation of Sogdian inscriptions and the unique image of a Buddhist *triptychon*.³

The gigantic Diamer-Basha Dam near the village of Basha, belonging to the area of District Kohistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is planned to be built about 315 km upstream of the Tarbela Dam, 165 km downstream of Gilgit-Baltistan's capital Gilgit, and about 40 km downstream of Chilas, the headquarter of the Diamer District. It will be the highest roller-compacted concrete gravity dam in the world, which extends from the foundation to the crest to a maximum height of 272 meters. The gross capacity of the water reservoir will stand 7.5 million acre feet (MAF), with a live storage capacity of 6.4 MAF. The mega project will generate a capacity of 4500 MW electricity to bridge the widening demand of energy, and with its water storage will also be used for irrigating land. The impending Diamer-Basha reservoir covering an area of 32,000 acres (110 km²) according to an estimation of 2006 will not only affect 31 settlements with at least 2995 houses located between Basha and Raikot Bridge and will force the resettlement of 26,398 inhabitants living in 3013 households.⁴ It will flood more than 100 km of the KKH and require the relocation of 140 km highway. It also will inundate at a stretch of 105 km along the Indus River of at least 88 archaeological sites including 68 rock art complexes in the Diamer District with at least 5717 engraved boulders or rocks covered with 36,187 carvings, among them 3610 inscriptions alone. Central parts of the endangered rock art galleries after the UNESCO world heritage convention of 1972 have an "outstanding

2 Stein 1944, 9 and 16–17 [+ orphan sentence].

3 + Orphan sentence.

4 A memorandum of the Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) in Lahore from January 2007 proceeds from the completion of the Diamer-Basha dam in 2015 and of the expected resettlement in 2014. Until this date an increase of the current 3013 households is expected up to 3800 in 2014. Three model villages at Thak Das, Harpan Das and Kino Das will resettle 4228 affected households. The Dasu hydropower project (3700 MW) is planned 2 km upstream of Dasu village and 69 km downstream of the Diamer-Basha dam. The Bunji hydropower project with an installed capacity of 5450 MW is ranked third in economic merit after Dasu and Basha. (4700 MW?). [+ See Hauptmann 2010].

universal value” both as cultural and natural world heritage, which should be protected and preserved for future generations.

The third hydropower project near Bunji with its 180-m high dam and a capacity of 7100 MW electricity will be probably located at the Indus upstream of its confluence with the Gilgit River near Asmani, and more about 15 km upstream of Sassi village on the Gilgit-Skardu road, about 83 km southeast of Gilgit. Not by this dam in the lower part of the Rondu gorge, but by the ongoing upgrading of the KKH the rock carving sites of Pari Das and Partab Bridge have been nearly completely destroyed. One of the most important epigraphic monuments of the western Himalayas, the large accumulations of petroglyphs at the Alam Bridge is endangered by the construction of the new bridge across the Gilgit River for the main connection of the KKH to Skardu. The upgrading of the KKH and the construction of new bridges are another threat for some of the rock carving sites situated above the water level of the future storage-lakes. The need for building materials for the establishment of houses and new settlements leads to the exploitation of the rock carving sites especially around Chilas and Thalpan, where an increasing part of the documented carved boulders and rocky reefs are blasted. The most dramatic loss of the cultural heritage not only in the Diamer-Basha region, but in all parts of Gilgit-Baltistan is caused by systematic illicit diggings, which ransacked major sites like the hill settlement of Patelo Kot above Hodar, the ruins of the monastery at Thalpan or the famous monastery ruins of Naupura near Gilgit, and above all by the plundering of the large ancient cemeteries. The investigation of the impressive Buddhist waterworks at the Satpara Lake, which maintained the irrigation of the Skardu plain, has been prevented through the construction of the Satpara Dam.⁵

Thanks to the activities of the Aga Khan Cultural Service Pakistan (AKCSP) in Gilgit since 1991, some of the most beautiful vernacular wooden mosques, astanas and Raja palaces in Hunza and Baltistan have been carefully restored.⁶ The most spectacular example of these monuments is the majestic palace dominating the Hunza Valley above Baltit Village, re-named Karimabad in honour of His Highness Aga Khan. Its thorough investigation of at least 20 construction phases and conservation took place from 1981 to 1996. The earliest structures of the Baltit Fort date back to the 13th century. An already earlier foundation, perhaps from the 11th century is attested for the Altit Fort, located on a cliff across the Ulter stream on the eastern side of Karimabad, which guards the ancient track along the Hunza River forming the southern branch of the Silk Road leading to the Mintaka or Kilik passes and further into Central Asia. Other examples of vernacular monuments are the 400 years old Shigar Fort, the 331 years old Gulabpur Khanqua on the Shigar River, a religious building of the Noorbakshi sect in Baltistan, and the 200 years old raja palace of Khaplu. Yet, in this region, where different cultures and empires have been meeting through several millennia, there has been no scientific excavation at all since the short attempts of Shastri in 1938 at the monastery of Naupura and at the stupa of Henzal near Gilgit. The documentation and systematic publication of the

5 Duncan 1906, 305. Emerson 1984, 105.

6 Bianca 2005, 165–285. Hughes – Lefort 1986, 2006. Muhammad 2009.

rock art galleries in the upper Indus region in Northern Pakistan and Ladakh can therefore only be a first, although important step to illuminate the long history of the high mountain region. What Karl Jettmar, the late doyen of anthropological and archaeological research in the Northern Areas, already emphatically stressed in his first years of his engagement is still valid:⁷ “An enormous amount of research is still to be done in the area in question – and it must be done soon if it is not to be too late. Every year counts”. However, after the PGAM had finished the archaeological field work in 2013 with an archaeological survey at Baltistan not much has been done to take relevant measures for the preservation of the cultural heritage there, which is under dramatic threat. Many local traditions as symbols of ethnic identity, traditional dances, music, songs and tales of the past are already lost.⁸

7 Jettmar 1959b, 93; 1985c, 107, see also: Frembgen 1999, 91.

8 + The information provided in this chapter will soon be outdated. Readers can follow the situation and find regular updates on resettlement, land acquisition, and on the cultural heritage plan on the WAPDA official website: <http://www.wapda.gov.pk/index.php/projects/water-sector/under-construction/diamer-basha-dam>. The reader will find some interesting additional information on what is going on, in the last pages of both Neelis 2017 and Zahir 2019. The first short article was published when this book was still being written, of the second work, HH was perhaps unaware of its ongoing publication. Both authors, along with M. Van Aerde and others, has published several other works on the Upper Indus rock art.