

A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE STUPA-LIKE STRUCTURE IN THE PETROGLYPHS OF THE UPPER INDUS VALLEY

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Pakistan, the land of a rich archaeological heritage, has been the focus of scholarly research of many indigenous and foreign archaeological missions. Since independence in 1947, the northern region of Pakistan (the Upper Indus Valley) is thoroughly being investigated for ancient 'rock-art' by the German and Pakistani scholars. This art of engraving has a very old and sharp historical profile. Although the first great discoveries in this respect were made by Ghulam Mohammad in 1907¹ and Sir A. Stein in 1942², the real progress was made after the independence with the discovery of thousands of rock carvings in the northern region. Since 1979, the Pak-German Study Group has discovered more than 35000 figural drawings and 5000 inscriptions, written in various scripts. These carvings, engraved on the surface of boulders, not only indicate the historical importance of this region but, also, are a major source of information of the cultural, religious and commercial exchange among the people of ancient Central Asia, China and the Indo-Pak subcontinent³, most probably, from before the first century B.C. onward.

These carvings are either drawings depicting different subject matter or are scripts of different languages⁴. Except for a small group of inscriptions, majority of them are already deciphered⁵. As far as the figural drawings are concerned, many of them are still not known what did actually they indicate? Our present discussion is about such figures that represent *stūpa*-like structures.

The carving of the *stūpa*-like structures is one of the most striking feature of the petroglyphs of the Upper Indus Valley. As compared to other carvings, they are frequently represented, neatly drawn, and showing a wide variety of form. They are generally constructed of one or more bases, a dome, a *harmikā*, *chattrāvalī* and banners. In some cases, the *stūpa* is marked with stairs (Fig. 1.2). Other *stūpas*, called as Kuberavāhana *stūpas*⁶ having divinities on either side below the first *chattra* (Fig. 2.1). Occasionally, the upper

1 Ghulam Muhammad 1980: 32.

2 Stein 1942.

3 Nasim Khan 1997: 104.

4 Nasim Khan 1998a

5 Nasim Khan 1998: 41.

6 Maillard 1994.

end of the *stūpas* is decorated with a crescent (Fig. 2.1) or a *dāṇḍa*. In many cases there is nothing on the top (e.g., Fig. 1.2), while in a few examples it is marked with an un-identified object (Fig. 1.3). The most astonishing characteristic of this monument, however, is the representation of a three-pronged object or trident as the pinnacle (Fig. 1.1)⁷. The real difficulty in the interpretation of the structure under observation is caused by the presence of this trident object. Such *stūpa*-like structures with a trident on the top are termed with different names, however, their basic significance is not yet clear. This paper is an attempt to determine the specific role and the basic significance of these carvings.

The *stūpa*-like structure has been variably interpreted. Some of them are explained as “bottle-shaped” temples by A.H. Dani⁸. He calls it a *stūpa* when it is surmounted by a crescent and a temple when topped by a trident. He claims that the temple is derived from the *stūpa* except for the *śikhara* and the trident. He comments: “We have so far met several types of temples that can be clearly distinguished from the *stūpas* from the fact that they have trident as their finial while the *stūpas* have crescent and circle. The only other difference is that the temples show *śikhara* (temple spire) on the top of the main structure while the *stūpas* have umbrellas. But the way in which the temples are built, clearly indicate that the form is derived from that of the *stūpas* except the *śikhara* and the trident”⁹. Although K. Jettmar has tackled this problem in different ways¹⁰, no satisfactory answer to this question has yet been found. He uses different terms such as “*stūpa*”¹¹, “*stūpa*-derivate”¹² or “mountain symbol”¹³ and remarks “So we are confronted with several interpretations side by side. None is completely satisfactory”¹⁴. Before designating such structures, it is pertinent to go through the nature and specific role of the trident symbols, also frequently engraved in a vast number. Until now, no proper attention has been paid to the basic significance of the symbol¹⁵.

7 The same type of object is placed on the right side, in the balustrade of the *stūpa* of Chilas II. On the left, a crescent can be seen with a pole. The *stūpa* belongs to the 1st century A.D.

8 Dani 1983: 212, n° 162.

9 Ibid: 220.

10 Jettmar 1985: 765-769.

11 Jettmar 1990: 809, Fig. 8.

12 Jettmar 1985: 767, Fig. 13.

13 Ibid: 770, Fig. 15.

14 Ibid: 769.

15 The trident symbol commonly used on coins, particularly those of the Kushana (Göbl 1984: Pls. 32, 33) and, with the exception of the ribbons, the Upper Indus Valley carvings are almost similar. On the coin the ribbons look like strings and are generally attached to one side. Triangular ribbons, very common in the carvings of this region, are also found on the coins. They are attached one on each side (Göbl 1967, Band IV: Tafel 15, n° 48).

The trident, either in composition with a *stūpa*-like structure or alone, has been generally represented in two different ways: with¹⁶ and without ribbons (Figs. 3.2, 3.1 respectively). There are, of course, variations in their shapes. Sometimes the dents of the trident stay straight and at others they are curved outward. What does the trident represent is difficult to say. Whether it portrays the *triśūla*¹⁷, (the attribute of Śiva), or the Buddhist symbol *triratna* or a *mangala* (both Hindu and Buddhist) is not known. Having close similarity with the *triśūla* of Śiva, it is being interpreted as a Hindu symbol. But this is not a convincing proof.

A.H. Dani has variably interpreted the trident symbol as a *triratna* (a Buddhist symbol)¹⁸ and a *triśūla* (a Hindu symbol)¹⁹. He basis his first hypothesis on the fact that the trident is accompanied by the Buddhist inscription in *brāhmī*, where in the word *śamano*' (monk) has occurred. He reads the inscription as "*pratiṣṭhita śamano iha*" and translates it as "established (trident symbol), monk here"²⁰. His second hypothesis is equally supported by the presence of a *brāhmī* inscription: *śamkarasya* (a proper name in genitive case), carved by the same person who did the trident. According to Dani, the inscription is Hindu and the trident represents the attribute of Śiva²¹. As far as the first claim of Dani is concerned, I could neither find the inscription nor the trident on the printed plate. The only *brāhmī* inscription on the plat does not correspond to what he has read. Also, I failed to find the plat referred to in the Dani's article²² in the support of his hypothesis. It will be difficult, therefore, to say whether the inscription and the trident are found in the same context; or they have been engraved by two different persons.

In the Indian Buddhist art, one often finds a tricuspded object which has been interpreted and named in different ways (for example, *triratna*, trident and *mangala*). In his article M. Bénisti has explained different hypotheses about it²³ and concluded in favour of *mangala* symbol²⁴.

In our case, it is difficult to say which symbol (*triratna*, *triśūla* or *mangala*) do these carvings represent? However, it depends on the context in which it is found. If it is a *triśūla*,

16 We have only few examples in this region.

17 Fussman 1978: 15 n°, 7; Dani 1985: 57, n° 60.

18 Dani 1985: 56, n° 54.

19 Ibid: 57-58, n° 60.

20 Dani 1985: 56, n° 54.

21 Ibid: 57-58, n° 60.

22 Dani 1985.

23 Bénisti 1977.

24 "Pour nous donc - nous le disons une fois de plus - ce signe est un *mangala*, et rien d'autre" (Bénisti 1977: 79).

the frequency of the symbol would suggest that the Hindu cult in this region was then very strong. But if we judge the fact in the context of other carvings, there is nothing of the Hindu cult except for a few divinities and some *lingas*. On the contrary, there are dozens of objects of the Buddhist cult that is the Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and *stūpas*. In addition to this, most of the inscriptions from this region are Buddhist in character. Some of them represent the Buddhist formula '*namo buddhāya namo dharmāya namo saṃghāya*!'. Thus, except for a few cases, the carving of a trident might represent a *triratna* or *mangala* symbol rather than a *triśūla*.

It is true that, with the exception of three, a *stūpa* is never represented with a *trident* or *mangala* in the Indian Buddhist art²⁵. In one of these examples, the *stūpa* carved on the pillar of a balustrade is surmounted by a *harmikā* in which is stuck a similar trident object, surmounted by umbrellas²⁶. Two garlands are attached to the two outer dents of the trident. The probable date is 2nd/1st century A.D.²⁷

The second example is that of a votive bronze *stūpa* (height 12cm) from an unknown locality in Gandhāra. It is composed of a base, drum, *harmikā* and parasols. On the top of all is a three pronged object²⁸.

The third example is of a wooden *stūpa* (Fig. 4) found at Tumshuk in Central Asia²⁹. It has a trident similar to that of Gandhāran examples as well as certain carvings of the Upper Indus region³⁰. This *stūpa* is composed of a base, drum, hemispheric *aṇḍa* and pyramidal *chattrāvalī* mounted on a trident symbol³¹. The most significant indication that supports our case is that the *stūpa* depicts the image of the Buddha. On the front part of the *medhī*, which is badly damaged and burnt, the left shoulder of a standing (?) Buddha is seen against an aureole. Apart from trident, the other thing which is common between the Tumshuk *stūpa* and that of the Upper Indus Valley carvings is the pillars placed between the dome

25 On the contrary, the trident symbol is found in many cases on the top of the Hindu temples (see e.g., Auboyer 1965, pl. XLVIII) representing the trident of Śiva. In some cases the trident is not fixed at its top but attached to one side (Kanwar Lal 1961: 171). It symbolizes the three aspects of manifestation: creation, preservation and destruction.

26 Deo 1973: 85, Fig. 104. The tridents of this region and the object in question of Pauni have not the same form. The carvings here are more like *triśūlas* while the tricusped object of Pauni resembles to the *triratna* symbol.

27 This relief has been found in the temple Jagannātha (Pauni), India.

28 Kurita 1990, Vol. II: 267, n° 808.

29 Bhattacharya 1977: Fig. 420.

30 From an unknown site, a *Triśūla*-shaped wooden object with a projecting part for insertion at its end has been found. This projecting part may be a tenon for fixing it into the *chattrāvalī* of the *stūpa* (Bhattacharya 1977: Fig. 515).

31 According to M. Maillard (1994), it deals with a *triratna*.

and the umbrellas³². The purpose of these pillars might have been to support the heavy *chattras*.

The above examples suggest that the carvings under consideration depict nothing but *stūpas*³³. However, the tricuspded object, thus, appears to be a *triratna* or a *mangala* except for the one found in the Hindu context (Fig. 3.3)³⁴ can be interpreted as *triśūla*.

Another possibility, although less plausible, is that the trident on the top of the *stūpas* might be a simplified form of a crescent and the sun, already attested in the rock carvings of the Upper Indus Valley (Chilas II) dated to the 1st century B.C.³⁵.

32 See e.g. Figs 1 and 4.

33 It should be noted that in this type of monument we have not yet noticed anything which resembles to window or a door that would suggest it a temple (Jettmar 1985: 769).

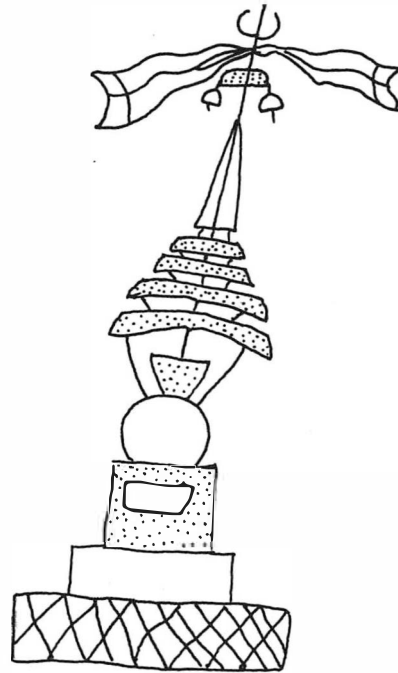
34 We have, so far, only one example which is to be considered a *triśūla* because of its context. It has been engraved by the same person as that of the *linga*, engraved nearby (Fig. 3.3) The same type of symbol can also be seen on the top of the great bulbous dome of Taj Mahal (Percy Brown 1942: Pl. LXXXVIII, Fig. 1. See also the replica of Taj Mahal (Ajit Kumar Dutta 1987: 27).

35 Fussman 1989: p. 21.

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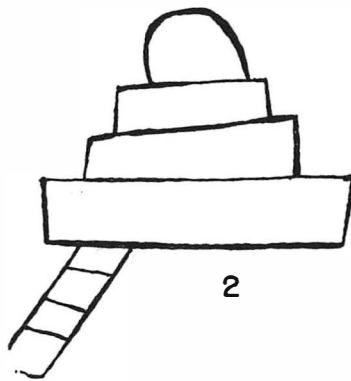
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1

Stūpa with a triratna or mangala symbol (Thalpan I)



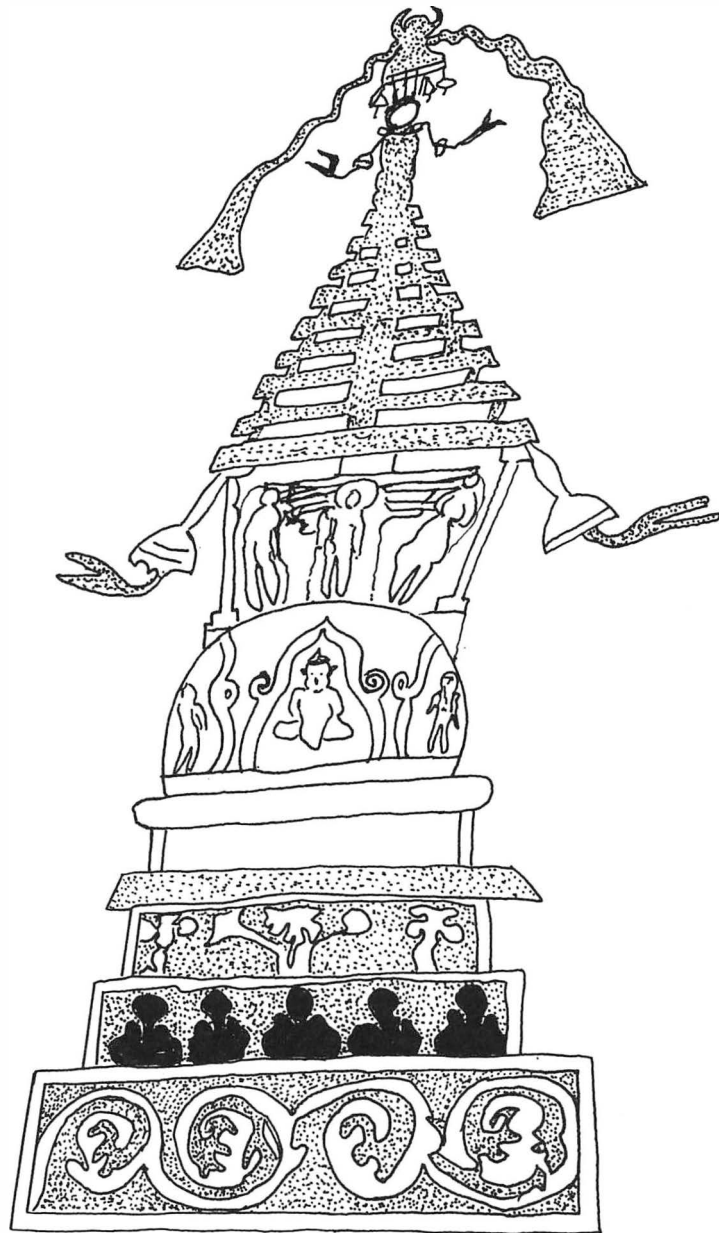
2

Stūpa with stair (Thor North)



3

Stūpa with unidentified object on its top
(Thor North)

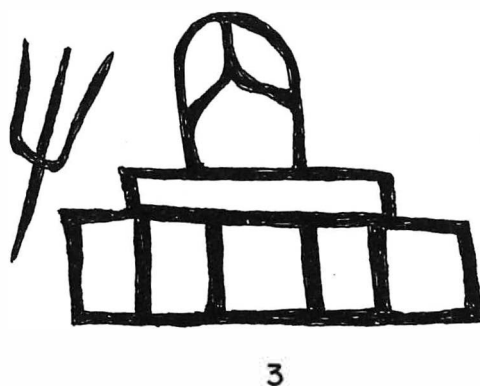


I

Stūpa (Thalpan I)



Figs. 3.1-2 Triratna or mangala symbols (Thor North)



Linga and toriśūla (Thor North)



FIG. 4 Wooden stūpa (Tumshuk -- Central Asia)