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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Minar Gah; rock art; Brahmi inscriptions; prehistoric rock art; historic rock art; Upper Indus Valley; Diamer; ritual dance; Shaivism; Buddhist imagery	Minar Gah is located on the left bank of the Indus River in Diamer District, Gilgit-Baltistan. During my seven visits to the site between 2000 and 2022, I documented rock carvings and inscriptions on boulders scattered across the area. Some of the boulders at Minar Gah are almost entirely covered with rock carvings and Brahmi inscriptions. Although the Brahmi inscriptions have been catalogued, many of the carvings have received little attention. This paper deals with the prehistoric and historic rock art of Minar Gah, including animal figures, hunting scenes, warriors, dancers, stupas, a linga, trident-like symbols and other motifs. I also discuss the dancing scenes and Shaiva imagery, drawing comparisons with rock carvings documented elsewhere in the Upper Indus Valley and during my fieldwork in Sindh and Balochistan. The carvings and inscriptions record different forms of activity at Minar Gah and offer material for understanding the cultural and religious history of the Upper Indus Valley.
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Introduction

The Upper Indus Valley contains numerous rock art sites and inscriptions dating from different periods. Along the Karakorum Highway, from Shatial in Upper Kohistan to the valleys farther north, boulders and cliffs bear carvings and inscriptions left by people who lived in or travelled through the region. These include animal figures, hunting and battle scenes, religious symbols, Buddhist stupas and inscriptions. Among the prominent sites are Manro Das, Kino Kor, Bazeri Das, Minar Gah, Thor North, Helor Das, Oshibat, Hodur, Dadam Das, Chilas, Thalpan, Thak, Gichi, Shing, Partab Bridge and Alam Bridge. Danyor, Kuno Das and the Kargah Buddha near Gilgit are also important sites in the region (Dani, 1983, 1995; Hauptmann, 2005, 2024; Jettmar, 2002; Jettmar & Thewalt, 1987).

Minar Gah lies on the left bank of the Indus River in Diamer District, about 30 km west of Chilas (Fig.1). Its scattered boulders contain prehistoric and historic carvings as well as Brahmi inscriptions. Many carvings identified as prehistoric are found near the riverbank, while historic imagery and inscriptions appear on boulders closer to the Karakorum Highway. This distribution may reflect different periods of activity at the site.



Fig. 1. Minar Gah rock art site (Photo by the author, 2019).

Human and animal figures, geometric motifs and religious images are engraved on the boulders at Minar Gah. Earlier studies focused mainly on the Brahmi inscriptions, while many of the carvings received little attention. Jettmar and Thewalt (1987) briefly discussed two ibex carvings from the site, suggesting that they dated to the fourth century BC or later.

Other representations, particularly the dancing figures, linga and religious symbols, have not been discussed in comparable detail.

The main objective of this paper is to document the rock carvings and inscriptions of Minar Gah and discuss their cultural and religious significance. I compare selected carvings with examples from other sites in the Upper Indus Valley and with rock art that I documented during fieldwork in Sindh and Balochistan. The paper discusses dancing scenes, Shaiva imagery, animals, hunting and martial

scenes, Buddhist symbols and Brahmi inscriptions. Where the evidence does not permit a definite interpretation or date, I have avoided reaching firm conclusions.

Literature Review

Several scholars have documented and studied the rock carvings and inscriptions of the Upper Indus Valley, including Ahmad Hasan Dani and Karl Jettmar. Dani (1983) recorded the carvings and inscriptions of Chilas and neighbouring sites, discussing animal figures, hunting scenes, human representations, Buddhist stupas and religious symbols. Some of the human figures discussed by Dani (1983, 1995) are relevant to the dancing scenes at Minar Gah. Jettmar and Thewalt (1987) published discoveries made during German-Pakistani expeditions along the Karakorum Highway. They also mentioned two ibex carvings from Minar Gah, which they dated to the fourth century BC or later. Hauptmann (2005, p. 24) noted that Karl Jettmar observed a large concentration of rock carvings in different styles near the mouth of Minar Gah during his journey along the old Karakorum track in 1973. This observation contributed to Jettmar's recognition of the archaeological importance of the Upper Indus rock art sites and the subsequent development of systematic research in the region.

Jettmar (1989) discussed the development of systematic archaeological research on rock carvings and inscriptions in the Upper Indus Valley. Although some sites had been recorded earlier, systematic documentation expanded in the late 1970s. His work contributed to the study of rock carvings from different periods, their distribution and stylistic differences. In a later publication, Jettmar (2002) discussed rock art research undertaken between 1979 and 1989, providing further information on archaeological investigations along the Upper Indus, including the wider region in which Minar Gah is located.

Khan (1994) documented rock carvings and inscriptions at Helor Das, another rock art site along the Upper Indus. His study presented a preliminary record of carvings and inscriptions discovered during field visits in 1992 and 1993. In another study, Khan (1997) discussed Iranian symbols in the rock art of the Upper Indus Valley. He also examined the identification of stupa-like structures in the Upper Indus's petroglyphs (Khan, 1997–1998). These studies are relevant to the animal, religious and symbolic imagery documented at Minar Gah.

The German-Pakistani Archaeological Mission made an important contribution to the documentation of Upper Indus rock art. The documentation of sites such as Oshibat and Shatial provides a basis for comparing carvings and inscriptions across the region (Hauptmann, 2005). Hauptmann (2024) discusses prehistoric and historic rock art, including animal representations, hunting scenes and religious imagery. His research is particularly useful for studying the ibex carvings at Minar Gah and considering their place in the rock art of the Upper Indus.

Buddhist stupa representations form an important part of the rock art of the region. Dani (1983, 1995) discussed Buddhist imagery at Chilas, Thalpan, and along the Karakorum Highway. Jettmar and Thewalt (1987) also recorded religious carvings from sites along the Karakorum Highway.

The inscriptions of the Upper Indus have also been studied in relation to the history of the region. Von Hinüber (1989) studied the Brahmi inscriptions of the Upper Indus Valley, particularly the information they provide about people who travelled through the region and their cultural contacts. At Minar Gah, Brahmi inscriptions are engraved on several boulders. Two of these are located beside a linga representation. Whether the inscriptions and the linga belong to the same period remains uncertain and needs further investigation.

The rock art of Sindh offers useful comparisons with carvings from the Upper Indus Valley. Kalhoru (2009) documented the carvings and inscriptions of Sado Mazo in Johi, Dadu, including a dancing girl flanked by two swastikas. During an archaeological survey of the Sallari Valley in Khirthar, Kalhoru (2011a) recorded archaeological remains and rock art. His study of Shakloi Dhoro in the Gaj Valley (2011b) documented animal figures, hunting scenes, dancing figures, Buddhist stupas and religious imagery. Of particular interest are the dancing figures near a verandah-like structure at Chiti rock art site, which may be compared with the dancing scene at Minar Gah. Kalhoru (2013, 2018) also discussed Buddhist traditions in the rock art of Sindh. In an earlier article, I documented the rock carvings and inscriptions of Minar Gah, including dancing scenes, linga representations, animals, warriors and religious symbols (Kalhoru, 2021). The present paper develops that study through observations made during repeated field visits and comparisons with published research on the Upper Indus and other regions of Pakistan. The study concentrates on the carvings that have received less detailed attention than the site's Brahmi inscriptions.

Methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted at Minar Gah during seven visits in 2000, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2019 and 2022. During my field visits, I closely studied the figures engraved on individual boulders, how they were arranged and where the boulders were located within the site.

I documented human and animal figures, hunting and battle scenes, religious images and geometric motifs. For comparison, I referred to carvings recorded at other sites in the Upper Indus Valley. I also referred to my fieldwork in Sindh and Balochistan, where I had documented dancing figures, swastikas and animal carvings similar to those found at Minar Gah.

I consulted earlier archaeological publications to understand how certain motifs had been identified and dated. For the Brahmi inscriptions, I relied on published epigraphic studies, as I did not undertake their decipherment. In interpreting the carvings, I considered their forms, the figures engraved nearby and similarities with examples from other sites. Where the evidence was insufficient, I have avoided assigning a definite meaning or date.

Major Themes in the Rock Art of Minar Gah

Dancing Scenes and Ritual Performance

One of the carvings that attracted my attention at Minar Gah depicts a row of human figures holding hands in front of a verandah-like structure. The figures seem to be dancing, possibly as part of a ritual or some other group activity (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Depiction of dancing scene at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2019).

Similar dancing figures are found at other rock art sites in Diamer. At Thor North, several human figures seem to be engaged in dancing. At Ziarat II in Thalpan, seven figures stand in a row. Dani (1983) described them as men carrying a raft. However, their posture also suggests dancing. A hunter aiming at a markhor is engraved close to these figures, raising the possibility that the performance was associated with hunting. The relationship between the two scenes makes such an interpretation possible, although it cannot be regarded as certain.

Dancing scenes are also known from rock art sites farther south. At Chiti in the Gaj Valley, Sindh, I documented a row of dancers before a verandah-like structure (Kalhor, 2018). At other sites in Sindh, dancers are represented in association with bulls. A comparable scene appears in the rock shelters of Pallimas near Wadh in Khuzdar District, Balochistan, where figures arranged in a row are shown before a bull. These examples indicate that collective dancing was represented in the rock art of different regions, although the meaning of individual scenes may have varied according to their cultural setting.

The row of figures at Minar Gah is distinguished by their arrangement before a verandah-like structure. The depiction suggests a group performance, possibly associated with ritual, hunting, celebration or another occasion.

Linga Representations and Shaiva Imagery

Among the religious carvings at Minar Gah, the representation of a linga is particularly noteworthy (Fig. 3). It stands on a base, with two Brahmi inscriptions engraved to its left. The form of the carving distinguishes it from simple phallic representations and suggests its identification as a religious symbol associated with Shiva. The inscriptions beside it may also be important for understanding its context, although their relationship with the image requires closer epigraphic examination.



Fig. 3. Linga and Brahmi inscriptions at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2019).

Linga representations are also known from other rock art sites in the Upper Indus Valley. At Manro Das, opposite Minar Gah on the right bank of the Indus, a linga is engraved on a boulder. A linga is also engraved at Thor North. At Shatial, numerous phallic carvings have been documented, but not all can be regarded as Shiva lingas. Unlike these carvings, the linga at Minar Gah is shown upright on a stand. Dani (1983) discussed a standing figure of Shiva at Chilas II rock art site. He also mentioned the figures of Balarama and Krishna. Dani's work provides a foundation to other rock art research scholars.

The linga at Minar Gah is one of several Shaiva representations found in the Upper Indus Valley, where Buddhist imagery is also engraved on rocks at different sites (Arif, 2002). Arif (2014) believes

that Shaivism and Buddhism certainly existed side by side in the mountainous territory of Gilgit-Baltistan.

The date of the Minar Gah carving is not yet established. A closer study of the linga and the Brahmi inscriptions beside it may provide further information about its history.

Animal Representations and Hunting Scenes

Among the animals engraved on the boulders at Minar Gah, the ibex is the most frequently depicted. Ibex carvings are also common at other rock art sites in the Upper Indus Valley. At Minar Gah, some are engraved separately, while others are shown alongside human figures and other motifs.

One boulder at Minar Gah shows two ibex facing what appear to be bodies of water (Fig. 4). Each ibex faces a similarly shaped feature, while a human figure and a snake-like form are depicted nearby. The presence of these different figures on the same boulder is worth noting. Whether the scene depicts an activity involving animals or has another meaning remains unclear.



Fig. 4. Depictions of ibex and a human figure at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2008).

Hunting scenes form another part of the animal imagery at Minar Gah. Human figures represented in association with wild animals may be compared with hunting scenes at other Upper Indus sites. At Ziarat II in Thalpan, a hunter is shown shooting at a markhor near a row of human figures (Dani, 1983). This depiction, discussed earlier in relation to dancing, provides an example of hunting imagery appearing alongside other human representations.

Jettmar and Thewalt (1987) briefly discussed two ibex carvings from Minar Gah and suggested a date in the fourth century BC or later. Their observation provides a chronological reference for those particular carvings, but it cannot be applied to all the animal figures at the site. Differences in form, technique and association with adjacent figures need to be considered before suggesting dates for individual carvings.

The ibex representations at Minar Gah may also be compared with the animal imagery discussed by Hauptmann (2024) in his study of Upper Indus rock art.

Warriors and Martial Imagery

One of the boulders at Minar Gah depicts two warriors carrying battle axes and shields. One is mounted on a horse, while the other stands on foot (Fig. 5). Unlike the hunting scenes found elsewhere at the site, this carving shows armed men without any animals being hunted. The weapons carried by the two figures are clearly represented.

Armed figures are also found in the rock art of other sites in the Upper Indus Valley, although their weapons and the manner of representation vary. At Minar Gah, it is difficult to establish whether the two warriors are engaged in combat or taking part in another activity. No opposing warriors are depicted, and no other details help identify the event.



Fig. 5. Depictions of warriors at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2006).

Buddhist and Other Religious Symbols

Buddhist stupas are also engraved on the boulders at Minar Gah rock art site (Fig. 6). Similar carvings are found at Chilas, Thalpan, Shatial and other rock art sites in the Upper Indus Valley. Some stupas are depicted in simple outlines, while others show more elaborate architectural details (Dani, 1983; Jettmar & Thewalt, 1987). The stupa carvings at Minar Gah need to be studied more closely to understand their architectural forms and possible dates.

Two trident-like symbols are found on separate boulders at Minar Gah. These may represent the *trishula*, a symbol associated with Shiva. However, three-pronged symbols are also found in Buddhist imagery, where they may represent the *triratna*. It is therefore difficult to associate the two carvings at Minar Gah with either religious tradition without further evidence. Their association with nearby figures and inscriptions needs to be considered before assigning them to a religious tradition.



Fig. 6. Stupa image at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2019).

A swastika is also engraved on one of the boulders at Minar Gah (Fig. 7). The motif appears at several rock art sites elsewhere in Pakistan. Both left- and right-facing examples have been documented at Shatial and other sites in the Upper Indus, sometimes in association with inscriptions and religious imagery.

The swastika is also represented in the rock art of Sindh. At Sado Mazo in Johi, two swastikas flank a carving of a dancing girl, one on either side of the figure (Kalhor, 2009). Other examples are found in the Khirthar Range, where left-facing swastikas have been documented in association with Buddhist imagery (Kalhor, 2013). These carvings show that the motif was used in different rock art sites across Pakistan. Its appearance over such a wide geographical area, however, does not necessarily imply that it carried the same meaning in every context. The Minar Gah example should therefore be interpreted in relation to the carvings and inscriptions around it rather than assigned a religious identity based on its form alone.



Fig. 7. Trident-like symbol, swastika, anthropomorphic figure and inscriptions at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2008).

A handprint is also engraved on one of the boulders at Minar Gah. Such carvings have been documented at several rock art sites along the Indus, from Shatial to Shing Nala. Handprints are also found in the rock art of Sindh, including Sado Mazo (Kalhor, 2009). The purpose of these handprints remains uncertain. At Minar Gah, there are no clear indications of what the handprint was intended to signify.

Brahmi Inscriptions and Movement along the Indus

Several Brahmi inscriptions have been recorded at Minar Gah (Fig. 8). These inscriptions are engraved on different boulders. Similar inscriptions appear at other sites along the Upper Indus, providing valuable information about the people who visited or travelled through the region during the historic period (Denwood, 2009).



Fig. 8. Brahmi inscription at Minar Gah (Photo by the author, 2006).

Von Hinüber (1989) studied the Brahmi inscriptions of the Upper Indus Valley, particularly the names and other short records left on rocks. His research sheds light on the history of the region and the movement of people along the Indus. The inscriptions at Minar Gah have been catalogued in the *Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans* (MANP) series. However, the possible connections between the inscriptions and nearby carvings have not been fully investigated.

Minar Gah lies along the Indus corridor, which connected settlements and valleys towards Gilgit and other northern regions. Travellers passing through this route may have stopped at Minar Gah and engraved their names or other records on the boulders. They might have included traders, pilgrims and people travelling for other purposes. However, it is difficult to identify who left these inscriptions or why they visited the site without studying the individual records.

Discussion

During my visits to Minar Gah, I noticed a difference in the location of prehistoric and historic carvings. Many carvings identified as prehistoric were concentrated on boulders near the Indus, whereas religious images and Brahmi inscriptions of the historic period were mainly found closer to the Karakorum Highway. The distribution may reflect different periods of engraving at the site,

although the location of the boulders alone is not sufficient to date them. The forms of the figures, the subjects represented and their association with inscriptions must also be considered. Hauptmann (2024) has discussed the different styles and periods of rock art in the Upper Indus Valley.

ibex are the most frequently depicted animals at Minar Gah, a feature also noted at other Upper Indus rock art sites (Dani, 1983; Jettmar & Thewalt, 1987; Hauptmann, 2024). During my fieldwork, one depiction attracted my attention. It shows two ibex facing what seem to be bodies of water, with a human figure and a snake-like form engraved nearby. Unlike hunting scenes in which a hunter is shown pursuing or shooting an animal, this representation contains no such action. I find it difficult to interpret the scene as hunting, although the relationship between the figures remains unclear.

Another carving that interested me was the row of dancing figures before a verandah-like structure. I had documented a somewhat similar scene at Chiti in the Gaj Valley, Sindh. Rows of human figures are also depicted at Thalpan and Thor North, although their positioning differs. The figures seem to be taking part in a group performance at Minar Gah. It is possible that the dance was associated with a ritual, hunting or a celebration, but the carving offers no clear indication of the occasion. The depiction of two armed men on another boulder also shows that the artists represented activities other than dancing and hunting.

The religious carvings at Minar Gah are equally interesting. Buddhist stupas are engraved on some boulders, while a linga represents Shaiva imagery. The presence of Buddhist and Shaiva images at Minar Gah indicates that more than one religious tradition is represented at the site. It appears that these carvings were made during different periods.

I also compared the trident-like symbols and swastika at Minar Gah with examples I had documented in Sindh. Swastikas are found at Sado Mazo and other rock art sites in the Khirthar Range (Kalhoro, 2009, 2013). The trident-like carvings are more difficult to identify because similar symbols are known in both Shaiva and Buddhist traditions. Although these comparisons are useful, I do not think that the religious meaning of the Minar Gah symbols can be determined merely from their resemblance to carvings elsewhere. Their association with nearby images and inscriptions needs further attention.

The Brahmi inscriptions provide another aspect of the history of Minar Gah. Von Hinüber (1989) discussed the inscriptions of the Upper Indus and their importance for understanding the movement of people and cultural contacts in the region. During my visits, I was more interested in the two inscriptions engraved to the left of the linga. Their position raises an interesting question: were the inscriptions engraved when the linga was made, or were they added later? The available evidence does not answer this question. A study of the letter forms may help establish their dates and possible relationship with the carving.

The dancing figures, the linga and the unusual ibex depictions need closer study. These carvings cannot all be explained through comparisons with similar figures elsewhere. Their location, arrangement and association with other images must also be studied. Although the Brahmi

inscriptions have been catalogued by German scholars, much remains to be understood about the carvings themselves and the different periods of activity at Minar Gah.

Conclusion

During my seven visits to Minar Gah between 2000 and 2022, I documented a variety of rock carvings, many of which had received little attention from earlier researchers. Much has been written about the Brahmi inscriptions, but the carvings are equally important for understanding the history of the site. These include animal figures, hunting and battle scenes, dancers and religious images. I also noticed differences in the location of prehistoric and historic carvings, which may indicate that the boulders were engraved at different times.

Among the carvings that attracted my attention were the dancing figures before a verandah-like structure, the linga with two Brahmi inscriptions engraved to its left and the unusual depiction of two ibex with other figures. I have discussed these carvings in the light of my fieldwork in the Upper Indus Valley, Sindh and Balochistan, where I documented similar representations. The Buddhist stupas and Shaiva images at Minar Gah are also significant, although it is difficult to establish whether they belong to the same period. Further study of these carvings and their adjacent inscriptions may provide a clearer picture of the religious and cultural history of Minar Gah.

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