

# Petroglyphs Site at Shani Khel, District Mohmand

FAWAD KHAN AND ASIF RAZA

## Abstract

*The petroglyphs site in the Shani Khel area of Mohmand district was recently discovered. Mohmand, formerly a tribal agency of Pakistan, posed challenges for archaeological investigations due to its insurgent circumstances. As a result, limited research has been conducted in the area. The petroglyphs found at this site offer valuable insights into the ancient human activities and artistic expressions of the region.*

## Introduction

District Mohmand is one of the seven newly merged areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that was officially established as a separate district on July 1, 2018. Formerly, it was part of the administrative setup in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The area is named after the Mohmand tribe, which is one of the major Pashtun tribes in the region. The Mohmand district shares its boundaries with Afghanistan to the west and north, Bajaur district to the northeast, and Khyber district to the south. The area is known for its abundant passes, scenic beauty and rich minerals. Historically, the region served as an important route connecting the Peshawar Valley to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Ali, 2003: 21-22). The route also has been utilized by the formidable armies and peaceful caravans of merchants for accessing to the silk route (Dani, 1967: 7-8).

Like many other tribal areas, Mohmand also has faced security challenges due to militancy and insurgent activities in the past. However, with the merger of the former FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018, efforts have been made to improve security, governance, and socio-economic conditions in the area.

## Previous Research work

Prior to the current findings, there had been documentation of a sharada inscriptions and a rock carving in the region (Jan, Q 2002: 187). As mentioned before, the area remained undiscovered because of its difficult conditions and the inaccessibility to many of its valleys. The Directorate of Archaeology and Museums took the initiative in 2002-03 to conduct archaeological survey and explorations in the Bajaur and Mohmand areas (Ali.I & L. Rahman 2005: 55-90). As a result of this survey, numerous archaeological sites were discovered, shedding light on the rich history of the region. The area has been marked with several archaeological sites, ranging from the pre historic shelters to the proto historic cemeteries and the historic belongings of Indo-Greeks up to the Kushans and Hindu Shahis.

## The Shani Khel Petroglyphs

Shani Khel is a small village in Halimzai Tehsil of district Mohmand, located about 70km from Peshawar city. Geographically it is situated at 34°35'02 N and 71°35'58 E with an altitude of 2509ft. The recently discovered petroglyphs are located on a barren mountain slope in the very north-east of the area. The discovery of these petroglyphs suggests that the area was inhabited or traveled by ancient communities who utilized this particular mountain slope as a canvas for their artistic expressions.

## Boulder 1

This large size boulder in measures 458x243 cm and contains a total of thirty three carvings. These carvings display a diverse range of subjects, including human figures, horse riders, a camel, roughly square and

rectangular walled structures, as well as geometric loops. The dimensions of these figures fall within a range of 10 to 20 centimeters in height and width (Pl. 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d).

### **Boulder 2**

The second boulder measures 213x182 cm and is distinct in its depiction, featuring only a single figure of an animal rider. This animal rider is depicted holding a sword in upward raised right hand and a shield in extended left hand. This single depiction on the boulder suggests that probably this significant figure is of a savior or a warrior (Hauptmann 2001: 32) (Pl. 2).

### **Boulder 3**

The third boulder measures 200x210 cm. It contains a total of twenty five figures, with the dominant theme being the horses and horsemen. All the horsemen are depicted in same gesture with raised upward right hand and extended left hands. In addition, a geometric pattern probably was rectangular in original but broken now, is noted. Due to the broken portion it is difficult to say if it was kind of tamga or a building structure (Hauptman, 200: 170) (Pl. 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d).

### **Boulder 4**

This boulder was found in a poor state of preservation. Several broken and detached pieces were scattering around. The existing part measures 250x310 cm and preserves only two figures of horse riders. The top figure is depicted with upward raised hands and the lower, a bit larger in size is provided with extended hands. It looks they are depicted like standing on the horseback (Pl. 4).

### **Boulder 5**

The fifth boulder measures 275x150 cm and contains a total of twenty one figures. Notably, all of these carved figures are of animal riders. The theme of riders with upward raised hands continued here (Pl. 5).

### **Boulder 6**

The next boulder lying close to the no. 5 measures 210x170 cm and depicts only a single figure. This interesting figure noted on the top flat surface is that of a demon or shaman. The height of this figure is 14 cm and is carved slightly turned to his left with extended arms and palms (Pl. 6).

### **Boulder 7**

This boulder measures 285x240 cm. The boulder contains nineteen number of preserved horsemen figures. Some of the figures are quite visible and it can be clearly seen that these figures are holding swords in right and shields in left hands (Pl. 7).

### **Boulder 8**

The no. 8 boulder measures 150x190 cm and contains a total of six numbers of animal figures. An interesting aspect of this boulder is that the figures here are slightly larger than those found on previous ones. These are measuring between 20 to 35 centimeters in width and height (Pl. 8).

### **Boulder 9**

The last boulder documented in the Shani khel site is situated at a higher elevation compared to the other boulders. It has dimension of 620x780 cm and appears to have been purposely cut or shaped to create a flat

surface for carvings. Eleven numbers of horse riders are documented on this boulder. All of these horse riders are depicted with raised right hands, which could hold symbolic or ritualistic significance (Pl. 9).

### **Miscellaneous**

In addition to the intact boulders, several broken and detached pieces have been observed scattered throughout the site. These fragments are likely originated from the carved boulders but have been damaged or detached due to various human and natural activities. The presence of these fragments suggests the breadth and significance of the site but has been subjected to vandalism.

### **Making Technique**

It is interesting to note that the carvings in the petroglyphs site of Shani Khel village were created using the pecking method. The technique involves making small indentations or marks on the rock surface using a pointed tool or stone. The figures on the boulders were formed through various degrees by employing different densities and shapes.

### **Chronology**

Discovery of rock art sites is not uncommon in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. Several sites have been discovered and documented in different areas. The largest accumulation has been recorded along the silk route at the valleys between shatial, chilas and thalpan (Jettmar, 1986: 191-195). Similarly Swat (Tucci 1958, Khan, A 1994, Olivieri, L 1998), Dir (Tucci, 1958, Dani 1968), Buner (Oliveiri, L 1994), Chitral (Khan, F 2013, Zahir, M 2020), Swabi (Khan, S 1995) has already reported with large number of petroglyphs and rock carvings. These consisted of human figures, animal figures, hunting scenes, religious figures and symbols, inscriptions and decorative motifs ranging from a period of pre-historic to the early advent of Islam.

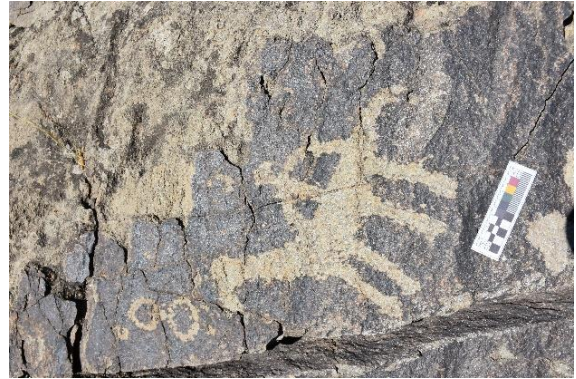
In the case of Shani khel site, the total number of carvings documented exceeds more than one hundred. This number may increase if the area is thoroughly surveyed and explored. The presence of rock carvings with the similar theme and style of depiction in other parts of Mohmand, Bajaur, and surrounding localities suggests a regional cultural connection and continuity. Similar type of rock carvings have been documented at Alingar, Surgatkai and Gatkai Kohi in Mohmand (Ali.I & L. Rahman 2005), at Nawagai in Bajaur (Ali.I & L. Rahman 2005, Khan, M. et.al 2000) and at Chinga Banda in Charsadda (Jan, Q. 2001). This indicates that the ancient inhabitants of these areas shared common artistic traditions and cultural practices and hence it is plausible that these rock carvings were created during the 5th to 7th centuries AD.

## Bibliography

- Ali, I. (2003). Early Settlements, Irrigation and Trade Routes in Peshawar Plain, Pakistan, *Frontier Archaeology*, Vol. 1, Peshawar.
- Ali, I & Lutf-ur-Rahman. (2005). Survey and Exploration in Bajaur-Mohmand Region, Pakistan, *Frontier Archaeology*, Vol. 3, Khyber Printers, Peshawar, 55-90.
- Dani, A.H. (1967). *A Short History of Pakistan*, Karachi.
- Dani, A.H. (1968). Buddhist Rock Engravings in Dir, *Ancient Pakistan IV*, Peshawar, 251-57.
- Jan, Q.M. (2001). Discovery of Rock Carvings at Chinga Banda and Shaikh Shanda, Paper presented in the Fifth National Seminar on Pakistan Archaeology, 199-214.
- Jan, Q.M. (2002). Archaeological Exploration in Mohmand agency, *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol XV, Peshawar, 186-197.
- Hauptmann, H. (2001). *Materialen Zur Archaologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans Band 5, Die Felsbildstation Thalpan V*, Verlag Philipp VonZebern, Darmstadt.
- Hauptmann, H. (2007). *Materialen Zur Archaologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans Band 8, Die Felsbildstation Thalpan III*, Verlag Philipp VonZebern, Darmstadt.
- Khan, F. (2013). Recent Discovery of Petroglyphs at Parwak, District Chitral, Pakistan, *Journal of Asian Civilizations Vol 36, No. 2*, Islamabad, 101-113.
- Khan, M.A. M. Bahadur Khan & A. Azeem. (1999-2000). Newly Discovered Rock Engravings and Inscriptions in the Bajaur Valley, Gandhara, Pakistan: A Preliminary Report, *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. XIII, Peshawar, 11-25.
- Olivieri, L.M. (1994). Recent Discoveries of Rock-Carvings in Buner and Puran NWFP Pakistan, *East and West Vol 44 nos. 2-4*, Rome, 467-480.
- Olivieri, L.M. (1998). The Rock-Carvings of Gogdara I Swat, *East and West Vol 48 nos. 1-2*, Rome, 57-92.
- Tucci, G. (1958). Tucci, G. (1958). Preliminary Report on an Archaeological Survey in Swat, *East and West*, 9 (4), Rome, 279-328.
- Zahir, M. (2020). Analysis and contextualization of protohistoric petroglyphs at the Kalasha valley of Birir in Chitral, *JHSS.XXVIII No. (2)*, Peshawar, 35-60.



Pl. 1a. General view of boulder 1



Pl. 1b. Details of figures



Pl. 1c. Details of figures



Pl. 1d. Details of figures



Pl. 2. Details of figure on boulder 2





Pl. 3a. General view of boulder 3



Pl. 3b. Details of figures



Pl. 3c. Details of figures



Pl. 3d. Details of figures



Pl. 4. Figures on boulder 4



Pl. 5. Figures on boulder 5





Pl. 6. Figure on boulder 6



Pl. 7. Figures on boulder 7



Pl. 8. General view of Boulder 8



Pl. 9. General view of boulder 9